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Wandl The Invader

WANDL THE INVADER

1

"It's a planet," I said. "A little world."

"How little?" Venza demanded.

"One-fifth the mass of the Moon. That's what they've calculated now."

"And how far is it away?" Anita asked. "I heard a newscaster say yesterday...."

"Newscasters!" Venza broke in scornfully. "Say, you can take what they tell you about any danger or trouble and cut it in half; and even then you'll be on the gloomy side. See here, Gregg Haljan."

"I'm not giving you newscasters' blare," I retorted. Venza's extravagant vehemence was always refreshing. The Venus girl glared at me. I added: "Anita mentioned newscasters; I didn't."

Anita was in no mood for smiling. "Tell us, Gregg." She sat upright and tense, her chin cupped in her hands. "Tell us."

"For a fact, they don't know much about it yet. You can call it a planet, a wanderer."

"I should say it was a wanderer!" Venza exclaimed. "Coming from heaven knows where beyond the stars, swimming in here like a comet."

"They calculated its distance yesterday at some sixty-five million miles from Earth," I said. "It isn't so far beyond the orbit of Mars, coming diagonally and heading very nearly for the Sun. But it's not a comet."

The thing was indeed inexplicable; for many weeks now, astronomers had been studying it. This was early summer of the year 2070 A.D. All of us had recently returned from those extraordinary events I have already recounted, when we came close to losing Johnny Grantline's radiactum treasure on the Moon, and our lives as well. My ship, the Planetara, in the astronomical seasons when the Earth, Mars, and Venus were within comfortable traveling distances of each other, had carried mail and passengers from Greater New York to Ferrok-Shahn, of the Martian Union, and to Grebhar, of the Venus Free State. Now it was wrecked on

the Moon.[1]

[Footnote 1: See "Brigands of the Moon"]

I had been under navigating officer of the Planetara. Upon her, I had met Anita Prince, whose only living relative, her brother, was among those killed in the struggle with the brigands; Anita and I were soon to marry, we hoped.

I was waiting now in Greater New York upon the decision of the Line officials regarding another spaceship. Perhaps I would have command of it, since Captain Carter of the Planetara had been killed.

It was a month or so before that adventure, April, 2070, that this mysterious visitor from interstellar space first appeared upon our astronomical horizon. A little thing, at first, a mere unusual dot, a pinpoint on a photo-electric star diagram which should not have been there. It occasioned no comment at the time, save that some thought it might be another planet beyond Pluto; but this was not taken seriously enough to get into the newscasts. None of us had heard about it as late as May, when the Planetara set out on what was to be her final voyage.

Presently, it was seen that the object could not be a planet of our solar system; Coming in at tremendous speed, it daily changed its aspect, gathering velocity until soon it was not a dot, but a streak on every diagram-plate.

In a week or so the thing passed from an astronomical curiosity to an item of public news. And now, early in June, when it had cut through the orbit of Jupiter and was approaching that of Mars, fear was growing. The visitor was a menace. No astronomical body could come among us, with a mass as great as a fifth of the Moon, without causing trouble.

The newscasters, with a ready skill for lurid possibilities, were blaring of all sorts of horrible events impending.

I told the girls all I knew of the approaching wanderer. The density was similar to that of Earth. The oncoming velocity and the calculated elements of its orbit now were such that within a few weeks more the new planet would round our Sun and presumably head outward again. It would pass within a few million miles of us, causing a disturbance to Earth's orbit, even a change of the inclination of our axis, affecting our tides and our climate.

"So I've heard," Venza interrupted me. "They say that, and then they stop. Why can't a newscaster tell you what is so mysterious?"

"For a very good reason, Venza: because you can't throw people into a panic. This whole thing, up to today, has been withheld from the public of Earth and Venus. The Martian Union tried to withhold it, but could not. Every heliogram between the worlds is censored."

"And still," said Venza sarcastically, "you don't tell us what is so mysterious about this wanderer."

"For one thing," I said, "it changes its direction. No normal heavenly body does that. They calculated the elements of its orbit last April. They've done it twenty times since, and every time the projected orbit is different. Just a little at first, but last week the accursed thing actually took a sudden turn, as though it were a space-ship."

The girls stared at me. "What does that mean?" Anita asked.

"They're beginning to make wild guesses but we won't go into that."

"What else is mysterious?" Venza demanded.

"The thing isn't normally visible."

Venza shifted her silk-sheathed legs. "Don't talk in code!"

"Not normally visible," I repeated. "A world one-fifth as large as the Moon could be seen plainly by our 'scopes when well beyond Pluto. It's now between Jupiter and Mars, invisible to the naked eye, of course, but still it's not very far away. I've been out there myself. With instruments, we ought to be able to see its surface; see whether it has land and water, inhabitants perhaps. You should be able to distinguish an object on its surface as large as a city, but you can't."

"Why not?" asked Anita. "Are the clouds too thick? What causes it?"

"They don't even know that," I retorted. "There is something abnormal about the light-waves coming from it. Not exactly blurred, but a distortion, a fading. It's some abnormality of the light-waves."

A swift rapping on our door-grid interrupted me, and Snap Dean burst in.

"Hola-lo, everybody! Is it a conference? You look so solemn."

He dashed across the room, kissed Venza, pretended that he was about to kiss Anita, and winked at me. He was a dynamic little fellow, small, wiry, red-headed and freckle-faced, and had been the radio-helio operator of the ill-fated Planetara. He was a perfect match for Venza, for all the millions of miles that separated their native lands. Venza, too was small and slim, her manner as readily jocular as his.

"And where have you been?" Venza demanded.

"Me? My private life is my own, so far. We're not married yet, since you insist on us going to Grebhar for the ceremony."

"Do stop it," protested Anita. "We've been talking of...."

"I know very well what you've been talking about. Everybody is. I've got news for you, Gregg." He went abruptly solemn and lowered his voice. "Halsey wants to see us, right away."

I regarded him blankly and my mind swept back. No more than a few short weeks ago Detective-Colonel Halsey of Divisional Headquarters here in Greater New York had sent for us, and we had been precipitated into the Grantline affair. "Halsey!" I burst out.

"Easy, Gregg." Snap cast a vague look around Anita's draped apartment. An

open window was beside us, leading to a tiny catwalk balcony. It was moonlit now, and two hundred feet above the pedestrian viaduct.

But Snap continued to frown. "Easy, I tell you. Why shout about Halsey? The air can have ears."

Venza moved and closed and sealed the window.

"What is it?" I asked, more softly.

But Snap was not satisfied. "Anita, do you have a complete isolation barrage for this room?"

"Of course I haven't, Snap."

"Well, Gregg do you have a detector with you?"

I had none. Snap produced his little coil and indicator dial. "It's out of order, but let's see now. Shove over that chair, Gregg."

He disconnected one of the room's tube-lights and contacted with the cathode. It was a makeshift method, but as he dropped to the floor, uncoiling a little length of his wire for an external pick-up, we saw that the thing worked. The pointer on the dial-face was swaying.

"Gregg!" he muttered. "Look at that. Didn't I tell you?"

The pointer quivered in positive reaction. An eavesdropping ray was upon us.

Anita gasped, "I had no idea!"

"No, but I did." Snap added softly. "No one very close."

He and I carried the detector to the length of the hall. The indicator went nearer normal. "It must be the other way," I whispered.

We went to the moonlit balcony. "Way down there on the pedestrian arcade," I said.

"We'll soon fix that," Snap said.

Inside the room, we made connection with a newscaster's blaring voice. Under cover of it we could talk. Snap gathered us close around him.

"Halsey has something important, and it's about this interstellar invader. It all connects. His office paged me on a public mirror. I happened to see it at Park-Circle 40. When I answered it, Halsey's man wanted me to talk in code. I can't talk in code; I have enough to worry about with the interplanetary helios. Then they sent me to an official booth, where I got examined for positive legal identification, and then they put me on the official split-wave length. After all of which precautions I was told to be at Halsey's office tonight at midnight, and told a few other things."

"What?" demanded Venza breathlessly.

"Only hints. Why take chances, by repeating them now?"

"You said he wants me, too?" I put in.

"Yes. You and Venza. We've got to get into his office secretly, by the vacuum cylinders. We're to meet a man from his office at the Eighth Postal switch-station."

"Venza?" Anita said sharply. "What in the universe can he want with Venza? If she's going, I'm going too!"

Snap gazed at her and grinned. "That sounds like a logical deduction. Naturally he must want you; that's why he said Venza."

"I'm going," Anita insisted.

We left half an hour before midnight. The girls were both in gray, with long capes. We took the public monorail into the mid-Manhattan section under the city roof of the business district, and into the Eighth Postal switch-station where the sleek bronze cylinders came tumbling out of the vacuum ports to be re-routed and dispatched again.

A man was on the lookout for us. "Daniel Dean and party?"

"Yes. We were ordered here."

The detective gazed at the girls and at me. "It was three, Dean."

"And now it's four," said Snap cheerfully. "The extra one is Miss Anita Prince. Ever heard of her?"

He had indeed. "All right," he said. "If you and Haljan say so."

We were put into one of the oversized mail cylinders and routed through the tubes like sacks of recorded letters; in ten minutes, with a thump that knocked the breath out of all of us, we were in the switch-rack of Halsey's outer office.

We clambered from the cylinder. Our guide led us down one of the gloomy metal corridors. It echoed with our tread.

A door lifted.

"Daniel Dean and party."

The guard stood aside. "Come in."

The door slid down behind us. We advanced into the small blue-lit apartment, steel-lined like a vault.

2

Colonel Halsey sat at his desk, with a few papers before him and a bank of instrument controls at his elbow. He pushed his audiphone and mirror-grid to one side.

"Sit down, please." He gave us each the benefit of a welcoming smile, and his gaze finished upon Anita.

"I came because you sent for Venza," Anita said quickly. "Please, Colonel Halsey, let me stay. I thought, whatever you want her for, you might need me, too."

"Quite so, Miss Prince. Perhaps I shall." It seemed that in his mind were many of the thoughts thronging my own, for he added: "Haljan, I recall I sent for you like this once before. I hope this may be a more auspicious occasion."

"So do I, sir."

Snap said, "We've been afraid hardly to do more than a whisper. But you're insulated here, and we're mighty curious."

Halsey nodded. "I can talk freely to you, and yet I cannot." His gaze went to Venza. "It is you in whom I am most interested."

"Me? You flatter me, Colonel Halsey." She sat gracefully reclining in the metal chair before his desk, seeming small as a child between its big, broad arms. Her long gray skirt had parted to display her shapely, gray-satined legs. She had thrown off the hood of her cloak. Her thick black hair was coiled in a knot low at the back of her neck; her carmine lips bore an alluring smile. It was all instinctive. To this girl from Venus it came as naturally as she breathed.

Halsey's gray eyes twinkled. "Do not look at me quite like that, Miss Venza, or I shall forget what I have to say. You would get the better of me; I'm glad you're not a criminal."

"So am I," she declared. "What can I do for you, Colonel Halsey?"

His smile faded at once. His glance included us all. "Just this. There is a man here in Greater New York, a Martian whom they call Set Molo. He has a younger sister, Setta Meka. Have any of you heard of them?"

We had not. Halsey went on, slowly now, apparently choosing his words with the greatest care. "There are things that I can tell you and there are things that I cannot."

"Why not?" asked Venza.

"My dear, for one thing, if you are going to help me you can do it best by not knowing too much. For another, I have my orders; this thing concerns the very highest authorities, not only of the U.S.W., but in Ferrok-Shahn and Grebhar too."

He paused, but none of us spoke. Then Halsey said quietly, "Well, this Martian and his sister are here now in Greater New York. They have some secret. They are engaged in some activity, and I want to find out what it is. I have picked up only little parts of it."

He stopped; and out of the silence Snap said, "If you don't mind, Colonel Halsey, it seems to me you are mostly talking in code."

"I'm not, but I'm trying to tell you as little as possible. You, Miss Venza, need only understand this: the Martian, Molo, must be induced to give you some idea of what he is doing here."

"And I am to induce him?" Venza asked calmly.

"That is my idea." The faint shadow of a smile swept Halsey's thin, intent face.

"My dear, you are a girl of Venus. More than that, you have far more than your normal share of wits and brains."

It did not make Venza smile. She sat tense now, with her dark-eyed gaze fastened on Halsey's face. Anita, equally breathless, reached over and gripped her hand.

Then Venza said slowly, "I realize, Colonel Halsey, that this is something vital."

"As vital, my child, as it could be." He drew a long breath. "I want you to understand I am doing my duty. Doing, what seems the best thing, not for you, perhaps, but for the world."

I seemed to see into his mind at that moment. He might have been a father, sending a daughter into danger.

"I need not disguise the danger. I have lost a dozen men." He lighted a cigarette. "I don't seem to be able to frighten you?"

"No," she said. And I heard Anita murmur, "Oh, Venza!"

"But you frighten me," said Snap. "Colonel, look here; you know I'm going to marry this girl very soon."

"Yes, I know. You'll have to consider this a sacrifice, a voluntary descent into danger, for a great cause in a great crisis. You four have just come out of a very considerable danger. We know of what stuff you are made, all of you."

He smiled again. "Perhaps that prominence is unfortunate for you, but let me settle it now. Is there any one of you who will not take my orders and trust my judgement of what is best? And do it, if need be, blindly? Will you offer yourselves to me?"

We gazed at each other. Both the girls instantly murmured, "Yes."

"Yes," I said at last. It was not too hard for me, for I thought I was yielding him Venza, not Anita.

Snap was very pale. He stared from one to the other of us.

"Yes," he said finally. "But Colonel, surely you can tell us more."

Halsey tossed his cigarette away. "I will tell you as much as I think best. These Martians, Molo and his sister, do not know of Venza; at least, I think that they do not. They apparently have not been here very long. How they got here, we don't know. There was no passenger or freight ship. In Ferrok-Shahn, they have a dubious reputation at best; but I won't go into that.

"Venza, I will show you these Martians and the rest depends upon you. There is a mystery; you will find out what it is."

He reached for his inter-office audiphone. "I want to locate the Martian Set Molo. Francis, Staff X2, has it in charge."

The audible connection came in a moment. "Francis?"

We could hear the answering microphonic voice, "Yes Colonel."

"Is the fellow in a public place by any chance?"

"In the Red Spark Cafe, Colonel. With his sister and a party."

"Good enough. The Red Spark has an image-finder. Have you visual connection?"

"Yes, the whole room; they have a dozen finders."

"Use a magnifier. Get me the closest view you can."

"It's done, Colonel. I did it just in case you called."

"Connect it."

In a moment our mirror-grid was glowing with the two-foot square image of the interior of the Red Spark Cafe. I knew the place by reputation: a fashionable, more or less disreputable eating, drinking and dancing restaurant, where money and alcholite flowed freely. The patrons were successful criminals of the three worlds, intermingled with thrilled, respectable tourists who hoped they would see something really evil.

The Red Spark was not far from Halsey's office; it was perched high in a break of the city roof, almost directly over Park-Circle 29.

"There he is," said Halsey.

We crowded around his desk. The image showed the interior of a large oval room, balconied and terraced; a dais dance-floor, raised high in the center with three professional couples gyrating there; and beneath them the public dance-grid, slowly rotating on its central axis. A hundred or so couples were dancing. The lower floor was crowded with dining tables; others were upon the little catwalk balconies, and still others in the terraced nooks and side niches, half-enshrouded, half-revealed by colored draperies.

The image now was silent, for Halsey was not bothering with audio connection. But it was a riot of color, flashing colored floodlights bathing the dancers in vivid tints; and there were twinkling spots of colored tube-lights on all the tables. I saw, too, the blank rectangles of darkness against the walls which marked the private dining rooms, insulated against sight and sound. Here one might go for frivolous indiscretion, or for conspiracy, perhaps, and be as secure from interruption as we were, here in Halsey's office.

Venza asked eagerly, "Which is he?"

"Over there on the third terrace to the left. That table. There seem to be six of them in the party."

We heard Francis' voice; he was in Halsey's lower Manhattan office, with this same image before him. "We'll get a closer view."

The table in question was no more than a square inch on our image. We could see an apparently gay party of men and women. One of the couples was gigantic,

a Martian man and woman, obviously. The others seemed to be Earth or Venus people.

Francis' voice added: "I've got an audio magnifier on them. Foley's been listening for an hour. Nice, clear English. Much good it does us; this fellow is as cautious as a director of the lower air-lane. Here's your near-look."

Our image shifted to another view. The lens-eye with which we were connected now gave us a view directly over the Martian's table. We were looking down diagonally upon the table, at a distance of no more than ten feet.

There were three Earthwomen in the party. There was nothing peculiar about them. They were rather handsome, dissolute in appearance, all of them obviously befuddled by alcholite. There was a man who could have been Anglo-Saxon. A wastrel, probably, with more money than wit; he wore a black dinner suit edged with white.

Our attention focussed upon the other two. They were tall, as are all Martians. The young woman, Setta Meka, seemed perhaps twenty or twenty-five years of age, by Earth reckoning, in stature perhaps very nearly my own height, which is six feet two. It is difficult to tell a Martian's age, but she was very handsome, even by Earth standards; and in Ferrok-Shahn she would be considered a beauty. Her gray-black hair was parted and tied at the back with a plaited metal rope. Her short dark cloak, so luminous a fabric that it caught and reflected the sheen of all the gaudy restaurant lights, was parted, its ends thrown back over her shoulders. Beneath it she wore the characteristic Martian leather jacket, and short, wide leather trousers ornamented with spun metal fringes and tassels. Most Martian women have an amazonian aspect, but I saw now that Setta Meka was an exception.

Her brother, who sat beside her, was a full seven feet or more. A hulking sort of fellow, far less spindly than most of his race, he might have come from the polar outposts beyond the Martian Union. He was bare-headed, his gray-black hair clipped close upon a round bullet head, with the familiar Martian round eyes.

I gazed into the face of Molo, as momentarily he turned his head. It was a rough-hewn, strongly masculine face with a hawk-like nose, bushy black brows frowning above deepset round eyes. The face of a keen scoundrel, I could not doubt, though the smooth-plucked gray skin was flushed now with alcholite, and the wide, thin-lipped mouth was leering at the woman across the table from him.

Like his sister, he had thrown back his cloak, disclosing a brawny, powerful figure, leather clad, with a wide belt of dangling ornaments, some of which probably were weapons.

How long we gazed at this silent colored image of the restaurant table I do not know. I was aware of Halsey's quiet voice: "Look him over, Miss Venza. It depends on you."

Another interval passed. It seemed, as we watched, that Molo's interest in his party was very slight. I got the impression, too, that though at first he had seemed to be intoxicated, actually he was not. Nor was his sister. Anxiety seemed upon her; the smile she had for jests seemed forced; and at intervals she would cast a swift, furtive glance across the gay restaurant scene.

More drinks arrived. The Earthpeople at the table here seemed upon the verge of stupor; and suddenly it appeared that Molo had completely lost interest in them. With a gesture to his sister, he abruptly rose from his seat. She joined him. They left the table, and a red-clad floor manager of the restaurant came at their call. Then in a moment they were moving across the room.

Halsey called sharply into his audiphone: "Francis! Hold us to them if you can."

They were standing now by the opened door of one of the Red Spark's private insulated rooms. We caught a glimpse of its interior, a gaily set table with a bank of colored lights over it.

The figure of a man was in there. He was on his feet, as though he had just arrived to meet the Martians here, and a hooded long cloak enveloped him. It may have been a magnetic "invisible" cloak, with the current now off.

We caught only the fleetest of impressions before the insulated door closed and barred our vision. The glimpse was an accident. Molo, taken by surprise at this appearance of his visitor, could hardly have guarded against it. The waiting figure was very tall, some ten feet, and very thin. The hood shrouded his face and head. In his hand he held a large circular box of black shiny leather, of the sort in which women carry wide-brimmed hats. As Molo joined him he put the box gently on the floor. He handled it as though it were extraordinarily heavy; and as he took a step or two, he seemed weighted down. Just as the room door was hastily closing, Meka sliding it from the inside, we caught a fleeting glimpse of horror.

The lid of the hat box had lifted up. Inside was a great round thing of gray-white, a living thing; a distended ball of membrane, with a network of veins and blood-vessels showing beneath the transparent skin.

For the instant we gazed, stricken. The ball was palpitating, breathing! I saw convolutions of inner tissue under the transparent skin of membrane; a little tentacle, like an arm with a flat-webbed hand, was holding up the lid of the box. The lid rose a trifle higher; the colored lights overhead gave us a brief but clear view of it.

The thing in the box was a huge living brain. I saw goggling, protruding eyes; an orifice that could have been a nose, and a gash upended for a vertical mouth. It was a face. And the little tentacle arm holding up the box-lid was joined to where the ear should have been.

Was this something human? A huge distended human brain, with the body withered to that tiny arm?

The palpitating thing sank down in the box and the lid dropped. And upon our horrified gaze the insulated door of the room slid too.

"By the gods!" exclaimed Halsey. "One of them dares come to the Red Spark. Here, almost in public."

So Halsey knew what this meant. His eyes were blazing now; his face was white, with an intensity of emotion that transfigured it.

"Francis, tell Foley I'll be in the manager's office in five minutes."

He snapped off; our image connection with the Red Spark went dead.

"We're going to the Red Spark," he announced. "This changes everything, yet I don't know. Venza, I may need you more than ever, now."

Halsey herded us to the office door. From his desk he had snatched up a few portable instruments, and he flung on a cloak.

It was a brief trip to the Red Spark, on foot through the sub-cellar arcade to where, under Park Circle 29, we went up in a vertical lift to the roof. We were in the side entrance oval of the restaurant in five minutes.

In the dim metal room of Orentino, the Red Spark's manager, a barrage was up and Foley was waiting for us. We could hear it faintly humming. Now we could talk.

Halsey slammed the door down. He said swiftly, "My men caught one of these things this morning. They have it now and I think Molo does not yet know we captured it. A brain; we're convinced it understands English and can talk, but no one has been able to make it talk yet. Foley, order that damned Orentino to de-insulate the room Molo is in. Now, by the gods, we may see and hear something."

The frightened manager of the Red Spark was in the control room. Halsey killed our barrage to let the outside connections get through to us. We all crowded around the mirror-grid which stood on Orentino's desk. Foley gave us connection with the control room. We saw Orentino's face, his eyes nearly popping with fright. "Colonel Halsey, I will do whatever you tell me."

"What room is that Martian occupying?"

"Insulated 39."

"Break off the insulation. Do it slowly and he may not notice. Then give us connection, audio and vision."

"But I have no image-finders in the insulated rooms."

"Cut off the barrage. I'll get connection there."

Foley was already setting up his eavesdropper on the desk. The mirror blurred a little; then it clarified. We had the interior of the secret room, and voices were coming out of Foley's tiny receiver.

The image showed the box on the floor, with its lid down. The tall hooded shape of the stranger stood with Molo and his sister by the table. They were talk-

ing in swift, vehement undertones. The language was Martian, a dialect principally used in Ferrok-Shahn. Our equipment brought it in and I could understand it.

Molo was saying: "But you are the fool to have dared to come here!"

"The master knows that there is danger. Something is wrong." The hooded stranger spoke like a foreigner, but not a Martian, nor an Earthman, and not like any person of Venus I had ever heard. It was a strange, indescribable intonation, a flat, hollow voice.

"I say the master is concerned."

"Let him be."

"And he demanded I bring him here to find you. He is displeased that you are here."

What gruesome thing was this? Their glances seemed to go to the box on the floor at their feet, as though the master were in there. But the lid of the box did not rise.

"Well, you have found me," Molo declared impatiently. "When you know me better, always you will find I have my wits. The thing is for tomorrow night, not tonight."

"But that, my master is not sure." The hollow voice was deferential but insistent. "He fears danger; something has gone wrong. He is working on it now, striving to receive the message! There is a message. He knows that much. Perhaps from our world, Wandl, itself."

For a moment Molo had no answer. His sister had not spoken. I noticed that her gaze seemed roving the room.

"What is it I should do?" Molo asked at last.

"Come with us to your home-room."

"But I have everything ready there. The contact is ready for tomorrow night. Your world will control Earth."

"But if it be tonight?"

Again Molo was silent. My breath stopped. On our mirror I saw the stranger's hood part just a little. There seemed to be no face; just the blur of something brownish.

"But if it be tonight?" the voice insisted.

"I will go," Molo said abruptly, "but your coming here was dangerous. Suppose we cannot get out undetected? You know I will never go to where all our instruments are set up and have some damnable spy follow me. Is all going well on Venus and Mars?"

"Yes. My master feels so. He seems to get messages. The contacts will be made simultaneously." A gruesome chuckle. "The capture of these three worlds. We

shall have all three enchained at once. Helpless.''

The lid of the black box seemed again about to rise when there came a sharp cry from Meka. ''This room is not insulated!''

Our eavesdropping was discovered. Beside me, I heard Halsey give a low curse. On our mirror we saw sudden action. The ten-foot, cloaked figure laboriously lifted the black box, and swung with it toward the outer wall of the room. I saw now clearly with what a dragging, heavy tread that giant shape moved, as though it weighed, here on Earth, far more than the normal weight to which it was accustomed.

''Over there!'' Molo gasped. ''The escape-port; this room has one. Meka, go with him. I will join you. You know where.''

Foley cried, ''Colonel, I may be able to stop them!''

But Halsey saw on our image that Molo was staying. ''Wait. Let them go. If we have the Martian here, that's better.''

I saw the room's escape-port swing open as Meka and the hooded shape carrying the box moved for it. The moonlit darkness of the outer catwalk enveloped the disappearing figures.

Molo was left alone. He closed the port swiftly. His detector now was in his hand, but Halsey anticipated him by a second or two. Our listener went dead; our mirror darkened. Doubtless Molo was never sure whether he had been spied on or not.

Halsey was on his feet. ''Foley, get out into the main room. Stay with him.''

But there was no need to follow Molo. He had sent his visitor and sister out by the escape-port, which was usual enough; now he was back in the main room as though nothing of importance had happened, with an appearance of intoxication about him. He wavered jovially across the room, threading his way through the gay diners, and reached the table where his party still sat carousing.

Again Halsey shut us off.

''He's got a base somewhere in the city; you heard what they said about it. We've got to trick him into going there, unsuspecting.''

Halsey seized the audiphone. ''Your chance, Venza. It's the only way. Foley, keep away from that Martian. Shut off all contacts. I'll meet you out there in a moment. I'm sending a girl; she'll go after him.''

''Now?'' Venza asked.

''Yes. It's the only way. Perhaps you can get him drinking. Venza, use all the wiles you possess now.''

''No!'' gasped Snap. ''It's too dangerous!''

Anita was clinging to Venza. ''Colonel Halsey, I'm going too.''

Halsey stared, then made a swift decision. ''Right. That is still better.''

I jumped to my feet. "Colonel, I should prefer that one of us men...."

He gripped me by the shoulders. "Gregg Haljan, I take no suggestions from you!" His blazing eyes bored into me. "There isn't a second to lose. Don't you realize this means destruction of our three inhabited planets? I'll sacrifice myself, you, or these girls! Venza, take Anita outside. I'll join you immediately, give you last instructions. Take a portable audiphone with you."

He turned to Snap. "This is the only way. These demons can't be forced. You know that."

The girls were moving toward the door. I met Snap's anguished gaze.

"Gregg, don't let them go!"

"No! No, I won't!"

I made a lunge past Halsey, with Snap after me. Halsey did not move, but one of his rays struck us. With all senses numbed, I felt myself falling.

"Gregg—don't—let them...."

Snap had tumbled upon me. My senses did not quite fade. I was aware of Anita's and Venza's horrified cries, but Halsey pushed them toward the door. It slid up. I vaguely saw the two girls going out with Halsey after them; and the door coming down.

3

I have no idea how long it was before Halsey came back. Snap and I were seated on a low metal bench against the wall. The effect of the paralysing ray was wearing off. We were tingling all over, our senses still confused.

Halsey stalked in upon us. "So you are recovered?"

Snap stammered, "We—I say, we're sorry as hell we acted like that."

"I know you are." His voice softened. "If I could have done anything else, believe me, I would have. But I don't think harm will come to them. They're clever."

"Are they outside?" I asked. "Did they find a way of meeting the Martians? How long have you been gone?"

Halsey merely stared at me as though he had no intention of answering. And then the audiphone on the desk buzzed.

"This is Halsey," he said. "Yes, I have them here. Bring them—did you say bring them?"

We could not hear the answering voice, for Halsey had the muffler in contact.

"No, I would prefer not to come. I'm watching something. I'm at the Red Spark Cafe. Well, I'm going back to my office presently to wait there."

He continued in code. Like Snap, I had never had occasion to learn it. The words were a strange sounding staccato gibberish. He ended, "I will send them, Grantline. Very well, I'll tell them to locate him. At once, yes." He closed off the

audiphone.

Halsey swung on us. "You're all right now?"

"Yes." I stood up, drawing Snap up with me. "What is wanted of us Colonel?"

"That's better, Gregg." He smiled, but he was still grim. "I wanted you here to wait for this call from the Conclave of Public Safety. It met at midnight. They have ordered both of you there."

"That's a secret meeting, isn't it?" asked Snap. "There was no report of it over the air tonight."

"Yes. Secret." He was leading us to the door. "They won't need you for more than half an hour. When they finish, come back to my office. You can come openly." He stood with his finger on the door lever. "Good-by, lads. Foley will lead you to the service room. You are to take a mail cylinder for Postal Switch-station 20. They'll re-route you from there to the conclave auditorium."

The door slid up. "When you disembark," he added, "Ask for Johnny Grantline. You are to sit with him."

He showed us out and the door slid down before him. We trudged the corridor, and Snap gripped me.

"For myself," he whispered swiftly, "I'll go to the damnable conclave because I'm ordered. But I won't stay there long. Once we get out of it, if I don't route myself back to the Red Spark, I'm a motor-oiler."

I agreed with him. We had a mental picture of Anita and Venza in the Red Spark's public room. Doubtless Orentino had created a way for them to meet Molo. They would sit there in the Red Spark with that drinking party, and in less than an hour we would be back.

But as we crossed diagonally across an end of the main room with Foley leading us, we caught a glimpse of Molo's table. The party was still there, but Molo, Anita, and Venza were gone!

We had no time to get any information. Foley abruptly left us and another man took his place. In the service room a passenger cylinder was waiting. Our guide entered it with us.

At the switch station we had the breath knocked out of us. After another ten minutes in the vacuum tube, we reached our unknown destination. The cylinder-slide opened. We found ourselves with a lone guard; and through a gloomy arcade opening, Johnny Grantline was advancing, to greet us.

"Well, so here you are, Gregg. Hell to pay heaven, going on here. Come on in; I'll tell you."

"We were sent for," Snap said.

"Yes, but they don't want you yet. Come in here."

He waved away the guard and led us through a padded arcade into a low-

vaulted audience room, windowless and gloomy. Across it, a doorway panel stood ajar. Grantline peered through it. There was the glow of light from the adjoining room and the distant murmur of many voices.

Grantline closed the door. "Sit down and I'll tell you...."

"Where are we?" I asked.

"The ninth Conclave Hall."

I knew its location: Lower Manhattan, high under the city roof.

Grantline produced little cigarette cylinders. "Steady your nerves, lads; you'll need it."

He grinned at us. The hand with which he lighted my cylinder was steady as a tower-base, but he was excited. I could see it by the glint in his eyes, and hear it in his voice.

"What's going on?" Snap demanded.

"It's about this invading planet. By the gods, when you hear what's really been learned about it!"

"Well, what?" I asked.

He sketched what he had heard this night at the conclave. The mysterious invader was inhabited.

"How do they know that?" Snap put in.

"Wait. I'll tell you the rest of it. The accursed thing changes its orbit. It banks and turns like a spaceship! It stopped out in space; it's poised out there now between Mars and Jupiter. A world about a fifth the size of the Moon, and the beings on it can control its movements. They've brought it in from interstellar space, into our solar system. Evidently the point they've reached now is far as they want to come. They've poised out there, getting ready to attack, not only us, but Mars and Venus simultaneously."

Grantline gazed at us through the smoke of his cigarette. He was much like Snap, small, wiry, brisk of movement and manner, but older. His hair was graying at the temples; his voice carried the authority of one accustomed to commanding men.

"Don't ask me for the technicalities of how they reached these conclusions. I'm no astronomer. I'm only telling you their conclusions and what their discussions have been here for the past hour."

Heaven knows, we had no inclination to dispute him. What we had seen and heard at the Red Spark tallied with his words.

He went on swiftly, "The attack, of whatever nature it may be, is impending at once. Not next month, or next week, but now. Lord, Gregg, I don't blame you for staring like that. You don't know what's been going on for the past two days on Earth, and Venus and Mars. It's all been suppressed. Neither did I, until I heard it

here tonight. The U.S.W., the Martian Union, the Venus Free State, are all preparing for war. Every government spaceship on Earth is being commissioned. We're not going to sit around and wait for invaders to land; the war won't be fought on Earth if we can help it."

We stared. Snap asked, "What makes them so sure?"

"That war is coming? Plenty. This new planet has sent out spaceships. The planet itself is hovering sixty million miles away from us, about forty million miles from Mars and close to ninety million from Venus. Perhaps its leaders think that's the most strategic spot.

"Then it sent out spaceships, three of them. One is hovering close to Venus. Another is near Mars, and the third is some 200,000 miles off Earth. Several of our interplanetary freighters are overdue; it seems now that they must have encountered these invading ships and been destroyed.

"Still more, and worse: these three hovering ships have already landed the enemy on Mars and Venus. The helio-reports mention mysterious encounters in Ferrok-Shahn and Grebhar. For three or four days, Mars has been in a panic of apprehension; Venus almost as bad. And some have landed here. Not many, perhaps; but one has been captured. A thing—God, it's almost beyond description."

We could well agree with that, since Snap and I had just seen one.

"They've got it here," Grantline was saying. "They've tried to make it talk. They can't but they're going to try again."

He jumped to his feet and went to the door. "They're bringing it in." Upon his face was a look of awed horror.

We stood crowding the small door-oval. It gave onto a darkened balcony of the conclave hall. The girders of the city roof were over us. There were a few official spectators sitting up here in the dark on the balcony, but none noticed us.

The lower floor of the hall was lighted. Around the polished oblong tables perhaps a hundred scientists and high governmental officials of the three worlds were seated. Near the center of the hall was a small dais-platform. On a table there, someone had just placed a circular black box, similar to the one we had seen previously.

The hall was hushed and tense. On the dais stood a group of Earth officials. One of them spoke. "Here it is, gentlemen. And this time, by God, we'll make it speak."

Grantline whispered, "That's the War Secretary from Greater London."

I recognized him: Brayley, Commander in Chief of the land, air, water and space armies of the United States of the World. He was gigantic in stature, with a great shock of gray-white hair. A commanding figure, if there ever was one.

Beside him, Nippor, the Japanese representative in Greater New York, seemed

a pigmy. The acoustics of the silent hall carried his soft voice up to us. "I would be afraid of drugs. Will we use force? It is vital."

"Yes, by God! Anything."

It seemed that everyone in the hall must be shuddering: I could feel it like an aura pounding up at me. Brayley lifted the box-lid, reached in and raised the horrible thing. He held it up, a two-foot ball of palpitating gray-white membrane. Another living brain.

"Now, damn you, you're going to talk to us! Understand that? We're going to make you talk. Get that box out of the way."

They flung the box to the floor, and Brayley placed the brain on the table.

A glare of light, focussed on it, showed beneath the stretched taut membrane the convolutions of the brain, like tangled purple worms. The blood-vessels seemed distended almost to bursting now. The gruesome face, with popping eyes and that gaping mouth, showed a horrible travesty of terror. From where its ears should have been, a crooked little arm of flabby, gray-white flesh came down, one on each side and braced the table. And I saw now that it had a shriveled body, or at least little legs, bent, almost crushed under by its weight.

"Now, damn you," Brayley said, rubbing off his hands on a rough towel, "for the last time: will you talk?"

The goggling eyes held a terrified but baleful gaze upon Brayley's face. Did it understand? The eyes were fronted our way, and suddenly their glance swung up so that I seemed for an instant to see down into them. And it struck me then: this was a thing of greater intelligence than my own. A humanoid, with brain so developed that through myriad generations the body was shriveled, almost gone. A mind was housed here, an intelligence housed in this monstrous brain.

Were these the beings of the new planet which had come to attack us? But how could this helpless creature, incapable of almost everything, obviously, save thought, do the work of its world?

Then I recalled again that insulated room of the Red Spark Cafe: the thin, ten-foot hooded shape which was carrying the box. Was that, perhaps, an opposite type of being with the brain submerged, dwarfed, and the body paramount? Were there, on this mysterious planet, two co-existing types, each a specialist, one for the physical work and the other for the mental?

I stood with Snap and Grantline in that dark balcony doorway, gazing down to where the giant brain stood braced upon its shriveled arms and legs, and realized why we of Earth and Venus and Mars are all cast in the same mould we call human. It is a little family of planets, here in our solar system; for countless eons we have been close neighbors. The same sunlight, the same general conditions of life, the same seed, were strewn here by a wise Creator. A man from the Orient is different from an Anglo-Saxon; a man of Mars differs a little more. But basically

they are the same.

Yet, confronting us now was a new type, from realms of interstellar space, far beyond our solar system.

"For the last time, will you talk?" snapped Brayley.

There was another interval of silence. The eyes of the brain were very watchful. Its gaze roved the hall as though it were seeking for help. It shifted its little arms on the table, seemingly exhausted from the physical effort of supporting itself.

Brayley's voice came again. "Doubtless you can feel pain acutely. We shall see."

With what effort of will to overcome his revulsion we may only guess, he reached forward and pinched the little arm. The result was electrifying. From the upended slit of mouth in that goggling face, came a scream. It pierced the heavy tense silence of the hall, ghastly in its timbre, like nothing any of us had ever heard before. And in it was conveyed agony as though Brayley had not merely pinched that flabby arm, but had thrust a red-hot knife into its vitals.

The brain could feel pain indeed. It crouched with stiffened arms and legs. The membrane of its great head seemed to bulge with greater distension; the knotted blood-vessels were gorged with purple blood. The eyes rolled. Then it closed its mouth. Its gaze steadied upon Brayley's face, so baleful a gaze that as I could see the reflection of its luminous purple glow a shudder of fear and revulsion swept me.

"So you did not like that?" Brayley steadied his voice. "If you don't want more, you had better speak. How did you get here on Earth? What are you trying to do here?"

There seemed an interminable silence; then Nippor took a menacing step forward. "Speak! We will force it from you!"

And then it spoke. "Do—not—touch—me—again."

Indescribable voice! Human, animal or monster no one could say. But the words were clear, precise; and for all their terror, they seemed to hold an infinite command.

A wave of excitement swept the hall, but Brayley's gesture silenced it. He leaped forward and bent low over the palpitating brain.

"So you can talk. You came as an enemy. We have given you every chance today for friendship, and you have refused. What are you trying to do to us?"

It only glared.

"Speak!"

"I will not tell you anything."

"Oh, yes, you will."

"No!"

All the men on the platform were crowding close to it now.

"Speak!" ordered Brayley again. "Here in Greater New York is a hiding place. Where is it?"

No answer.

"Where is it? You are perhaps a leader of your world. I lead ours, and I'm going to master you now. Where is this hiding place?"

The thing suddenly laughed, a gruesome, eerie cackle. "You will know when it is too late. I think it is too late already."

"Too late for what?"

"To save your world. Doomed, your three worlds! Don't touch—me!"

It ended with a scream of apprehension as Nippor grasped the crooked little arm. "Tell us!"

"No!" It screamed again. "Let—me—go!"

"Tell us!" Nippor strengthened his squeezing grip. The thing was writhing, the thin ball of membrane palpitating, heaving. And suddenly it burst. Over all its purpled surface, blood came with a gush.

Nippor and Brayley staggered backward. The scream of the brain ended in a choking gurgle. The little legs and tiny body wilted under it; the round ball of membrane sank to the table. It rolled sidewise upon one arm and ear, and in a moment its palpitation ceased. A purple-red mass of blood, it lay deflated and flabby.

It was dead.

4

"But see here," I said, "did they mention the Martian, Molo, at all?"

"They were discussing Molo before you arrived," Grantline told us.

We had drawn back from the doorway. The conference, with the dead thing removed, was proceeding. Snap and I had momentarily forgotten Anita and Venza; but now we were in a panic to get back to the Red Spark.

"But you can't go," said Grantline. "Brayley ordered you here. He'll want to see you in a moment."

"Well, why doesn't he see us now?" Snap protested. "I'm not going to cool myself off sitting here."

"Oh yes, you are."

Grantline sent word to Brayley that we were here. In a moment the answer came. We were to wait a short time; he would want to see us.

We swiftly told Grantline what had happened at the Red Spark, and found that already he knew. Francis had relayed it to the conference, and Halsey was in con-

stant communication with the officials here.

"Then what is happening?" I demanded. "Where are the girls? Has Halsey heard from them?"

Again Grantline went to a nearby room.

"Anita sent a message," he said, when he returned. "They are with Molo. Halsey is ordering a squad of men to be ready."

Grantline told us what had been happening in the Red Spark. Anita and Venza, simulating drunkenness with a skill for acting which I knew both of them possessed, had joined Molo's party. Perhaps if Meka had been there she would have seen through them.

But Molo did not. And they have since told me that the Martian himself was far from sober, although he was probably not aware of it. He yielded to their demands to leave the restaurant with him. He wanted, as we know, to leave unobtrusively; and Venza threatened a scene unless she could go.

He took them, leaving openly in a public fare-car. Doubtless he at first intended to de-rail them somewhere, but they convinced him that he was not being followed. Twice he used his detector, and Anita and Halsey were clever enough to throw off their rays in time to avoid it. Then Halsey lost connection with the fleeing car, and after that Molo changed his mind about ditching the girls.

"But where are they now?" I demanded.

"You," said Grantline sternly, "are out of it. Do you think that Halsey, under Brayley's orders, will neglect any chance to find out where Molo is hiding? Something is about to happen. This conference is wrestling with it. In Grebhar and Ferrok-Shahn they're striving to find out what it is. Something impending now. Helios are pouring in here from Venus and Mars. They're mobilizing their spaceships, just as we are."

Grantline at last was letting out all his apprehensions on us, with this burst. "Halsey didn't tell you that the entire resources of his organization are out upon this thing tonight. Here at this conclave there's a room of information-sorters. That's just where I came from a moment ago. Every country on our Earth is making ready—for what, nobody knows!

"He's had two fragmentary calls from Anita. He has a hundred men ready to rush to their aid, and to capture Molo's lair. He expects another message from Anita any moment. This conference here knows every movement that is being made, within ten or twenty seconds of its making. Perhaps upon Anita and Venza the whole outcome of this thing may hang."

We had no answer to that. "Do you know who Molo is? He's an interplanetary pirate; his ship is the Star-Streak."

"Good Lord!"

We had heard of him. For five years past, a gray spaceship, with a base supposedly hidden in the Polar deserts of Mars, had been terrorizing interplanetary shipping.

"They think," Grantline went on, "that Molo was cruising with his pirate ship. He has, as you know, a band of criminals drawn from all the three worlds. There are about fifty of them, commanded by his sister and himself. We think that Molo encountered the three ships which that new planet sent out. The Star-Streak was captured, perhaps destroyed. Molo and his band, joined with this new enemy, to save themselves, and because they have been promised rewards."

"But why should these brains want their help?" Snap demanded.

"Wouldn't you say it was because, in Ferrok-Shahn, Grebhar and here in Greater New York, simultaneously tonight, something has to be accomplished, something the brains themselves could not do? Molo and his band know all three cities. How they landed here in Greater New York nobody knows; the enemy spaceship is 200,000 miles out. Obviously they came from it, landed secretly with some smaller ship somewhere on Earth and made their way here."

A buzzer sounded beside us. A voice commanded: "Grantline, bring Gregg Haljan and Daniel Dean to room six at once."

* * * * *

In room six we stood before the War Secretary, who had arrived there a moment ahead of us.

"Ah, Haljan and Dean. I'm glad to see you."

He was still white and shaken. Beads of perspiration stood upon his forehead. He mopped them off.

"I've just had a rather terrible experience." He did not suggest that we sit down. He went on crisply: "Grantline no doubt has told you of what's going on. Disturbing, terrifying. Haljan, we have a ship being rushed into commission tonight. You know her, the Cometara."

"I know her," I said.

"Quite so. She is taking off as soon as we can ready her. She will carry about fifty men. Grantline is in charge of the armament and men. You, Dean, we want to handle her radio-helio."

"Right," said Snap.

"And you, Haljan, we can think of no one better to navigate her."

He waved away my appreciation. "Within a brief time we shall have thirty such ships in space. Mars and Venus also are mobilizing."

He stood up. "We feel, Haljan, that if anyone can handle the Cometara with skill enough to combat this lurking enemy, it will be you."

"I'll do my best, sir."

"We know that. The ship is leaving from the Tappan Interplanetary Stage shortly after dawn. When have you and Dean last slept?"

"Last night," we both said.

"Quite so. Then you need sleep now. I want you to go at once to the Tappan Fieldhouse. The commander there will make you comfortable. Eat, and sleep if you can. We want you in good shape. You're to keep out of this night's activities here in the city; you understand?"

"Yes sir."

An orderly was approaching behind Brayley. "I'll be back in a moment, Rollins."

He shook hands with us. "I may not see you again before it's over. Good luck, lads. Grantline, they need you for a moment in the hall; something about electronic space weapons, further equipment for the Cometara. Then you'd better go to Tappan House too, and get some sleep."

We were dismissed. Snap and I regarded each other hesitantly. I said impulsively, "Mr. Brayley, Detective-Colonel Halsey is using two girls."

"Yes, we're watching that, Haljan."

"They're the girls we're to marry," I added. "May we communicate with Colonel Halsey?"

"Yes. Call him from here." He smiled wanly. "But keep out of it; we need you at dawn."

The Tappan departure-stage was only a few miles up the Hudson; we could get there in half an hour. It was now nearly trinight, halfway between midnight and dawn. I had my portable audiphone and got Halsey at once.

"You Gregg?"

"Yes. They're through with us at the Conclave. Where is Anita?"

"We heard from her twice. I'm expecting...."

We could hear someone interrupting him. Then he came back. "Gregg? Molo took them somewhere. I didn't dare fling after them. He had his detector going, and Anita warned me not to try it. She had to stop connection herself. God knows how she was able to whisper to me at all."

His voice, like Brayley's, had the ring of a man strained to the breaking point. I could appreciate how Halsey must feel, forced to remain at his desk with its encircling banks of instruments; holding all the network of his farflung activities centralized; his decisions, his commands in a hundred places almost simultaneously, while his body sat there inactive.

"Gregg, the girls must have arrived at Molo's place by now. If only they know where they are! I have lookouts throughout the city with intricate and complete connecting equipment. Gregg, I must disconnect."

"Colonel, give me Anita's frequency. Maybe Snap or I can pick up the message."

He named the oscillating frequency, then disconnected.

"Try that frequency," Snap suggested. "We've got to do something."

The door-slide opened suddenly and an orderly appeared. "Haljan?"

"Get the hell away," roared Snap. "We've had our orders; we don't want any from you."

"Gregg Haljan and Daniel Dean are paged on the mirrors."

Someone in the city wanted us; our names were appearing on the various mirror-grids publicly displayed throughout the city in the hope that we would answer.

"That's different," said Snap. "Answer it for us, that's a good fellow. We're busy."

"It must be important," the orderly insisted. "The caller registered a fee at the Search Bureau; that's how they located you here. He paid the highest fee to search you. An emergency call."

It was against the law to invoke the services of the Search Bureau unless based upon actual impending danger. "We'll take it," I said.

"Come with me." He turned to the left and down the corridor.

We hastened with him to a corridor cubby. Upon the audiphone there I was at once connected with a voice, and an anxious man's face with a two-day growth upon it.

"Haljan! Thank God you answered. This is Dud Ardley. Me and Shac are here. Listen, this is the lower cellar corridor, Lateral 3, under Broadway. Me and Shac just have seen your girls down here."

News of Anita and Venza! I could see in the mirror-image, behind Dud's head the outlines of the little public cubby from which he was calling. He and his brother, on some illicit errand of their own in East Side lower Manhattan, had seen figures alighting from a fare-car. They had caught a glimpse of the faces of Anita and Venza. The girls were hooded and cloaked; a hooded man was with them. The fare-car quickly rolled away, and the hooded figures, suddenly becoming invisible within their magnetic cloaks, had vanished.

"S'elp me, we couldn't do nothin'. You know we take no chances with the police by carryin' cylinders. So I paged you in a hurry."

"Dud, that's damn nice of you. Where are you now? Tell me again."

The Ardleys, knowing nothing of the events of this night, supposed that the girls were being abducted, and decided I should be informed.

"Damn right, Dud. We'll come at once. You two wait for us?"

"Sure. If you got instruments, maybe we can track 'em. It wasn't a quarter of a mile from here, over toward the river. Plenty of rotten dumps down there."

"Wait for us, Dud. We'll come in a rush."

I slammed shut the audiphone. Snap, beside me, had heard it all. He shoved the astonished orderly out of the way.

"What's the nearest exit-route out of here?"

"To the city roof, sir. Up this incline."

We dashed up the spiral incline, through a low exit-port, and were in the starlight of the city roof.

* * * * *

"Connect it, Gregg! You can't tell; her message might come over any minute."

I tuned my coils to the seldom used oscillation frequency which Halsey had told us Anita's transmitter was sending.

"Anything, Gregg?"

"No. Dead channel."

The air, in Anita's channel, was bafflingly silent.

We had been challenged by a roof-guard when we appeared from the upper port of the Conclave Hall; the city roof was not open to public traffic. But with our identifications, he found us a single-seat hand-tram, and started us southward on the deserted route.

It was a cloudless night, with stars like thickly-strewn diamonds on purple velvet. The city roof lay glistening in the starlight. In my great-grandfather's time there had been no roof here; the open city was exposed to all the inclement weather. But gradually the arcades and overhead viaducts, cross balconies and catwalks which spanned the canyon street between the giant buildings became a roof. It spread, now terraced and sloped to top the lofty buildings, like a great rumpled sheet propped by the knees of sleeping giants. Some of the roof was of opaque alumite, dark patches, alternating with the great glassite panes which in places admitted the daylight.

Our little tram sped along southward, wending its way over the terraces. Save for the guards and lookouts in their occasional cubbies, and the air-traffic directors in their towers, we were alone up here. The roof was tangled with air-pipes, line-wire conduits, aerials, arterial systems of the ventilating and lighting devices. As far as one could see the ventilators stood fronting the night breeze like listening ears. There were water tanks, great cross-bulkheads and flumes to handle the rain and snow. A few traffic towers maintained order in the overhead air-lanes. Their beacons shot up into the sky when the passing lights marked the thinly-strewn trinight traffic.

We were stopped at intervals, but in each case were passed promptly.

"Nothing yet, Gregg?"

"No."

Anita's channel remained empty. It was, I suppose, no more than ten minutes during which we sped south along the grotesque maze of the roof; but to us it was an eternity. If only some message would come!

"I'll pull up here."

"Yes."

I gathered up my little audiphone, thrust it under my dark flowing cloak. If only our cloaks were magnetic!

We leaped from our car. "In a rush, Haljan?" asked a guard.

"That's us. Orders from Mr. Brayley."

We left him and plunged into a descending automatic lift. A drop of a thousand feet; we shot downward past all the deserted levels, past the ground-level, the undersurface transportation lanes, the sub-river tubes, the sub-cellar, down to the very bottom of the city.

"Come on, Gregg. Two segments from here."

We advanced at a run. At this hour of night, hardly a pedestrian was in evidence. It was an arched vaulted corridor, almost a tunnel, dimly blue-lit with short lengths of fluorescent tubes at intervals on the ceiling. For all the vaunted mechanisms of our time, the air here was heavy and fetid. Moisture dripped from the concrete roof. It lay on the metal pavement of the ground; the smell of it was dank, tomb-like.

There were frequent cross-tunnels. We turned eastward into one of them. For a segment there were the lower entrances to the cellars of the giant buildings overhead. We passed a place where the tunnel-corridor widened into a great underground plaza. The sewerage and wire-pipes lay like tangled pythons on its floor. Half across it, by the glow of temporary lights strung on a cable, a group of repairmen were working. We passed them, headed in to where the tunnel narrowed again and there were now occasional cubby entrances to underground dwellings.

It was a rabbit warren from here to the river, haunted by criminals and by miserable families, many of whom never saw the daylight for weeks at a time. The giant voices of the city hardly carried down here, so that an oppressive silence hung upon everything.

"That next crossing, Gregg. They said they'd wait for us there."

Occasional escalators led upward. In advance of us was a narrow intersection. There were a few lights in the bullseyes of the subterranean dwelling rooms, but most of them were dark.

"Easy, Snap. Not so fast."

I pulled Snap to a walk. We edged over against the tunnel side. We had passed a small lighted audiphone cubby, evidently the one from which Dud and Shac had

paged us. They should have been here waiting; but there was nothing but the empty, gloomy tunnels.

"Something is coming!" Snap clutched at me; we drew our cloaks around us and waited in a shadowed recess. Down a side incline, a segment behind us, a small automatic food truck came lurching. It pulled up at an arcade entrance. Its driver slid the portals, deposited his cases of food, locked the panel after him; and in a moment he and his truck were gone up the incline.

We heard, in the ensuing silence, a low groan near at hand; then abruptly it stopped. We saw, within twenty feet of us, two dark figures lying on the pavement grid in a black patch of shadow where the mailtube came down in a curve and disappeared into the tunnel wall.

We bent over the figures of two men. They lay together, one half upon the other, black-garbed figures with white, staring faces. One twitched a little and then lay still.

They were Shac and Dud Ardley.

"Murdered, Gregg! Good Lord!"

Both were dead, but we could see no marks on either of them.

I found my wits. "Snap, we can't stand like this wholly visible."

I pulled Snap away. We darted a few feet. The light of the tunnel intersection was directly over us. "Not here, Snap! Run!"

Under the curving vacuum tube a little further along, we found shelter. Snap murmured: "The girls went past here. But which way, Gregg?"

As though I knew!

I felt at that moment, under the shirt against my skin, the anode of my audiphone tingling. A receiving signal! In the gloom, I could see Snap's white face as he watched me bring it out.

We heard a tiny microphonic voice, Anita's voice.

"Colonel Halsey. Yes I have the location. Lafayette 4—East corridor, lowest level. A descending entrance. Don't you speak again; I've only a minute! Venza safe—but send help. Something we don't understand—a strange mechanism here."

Then Halsey's interrupting voice. "Anita, escape! You and Venza!"

"We can't. They've got us!"

"I'm sending men. They'll be there in ten minutes."

"Ten minutes will be too late. Molo is...."

It seemed that we heard her scream; then the waves blurred and died.

Lafayette 4—East corridor, lowest level. "Snap, that's here! A descending entrance."

We stood back against the great curving side of the postal vacuum tube. Within

it I heard the hiss and clank as a mail cylinder flashed past. Halsey's secret orders must be going out now. His men nearest this place would come in a rush. But Anita said that would be too late.

Snap and I were frantically searching. Somewhere here was an entrance to Molo's lair. It seemed in the silence that Anita's scream was still ringing in my ears. Had it been entirely from the instrument, or were we so close that we had heard its distant echoes?

"Gregg, help me." Snap was tugging at a horizontal door-slide, like a trap in the tunnel floor, partly under the vacuum tube. "Stuck!" he gasped.

It yielded with our efforts. It slid aside. Steps led downward into blackness. We plunged in, caution gone from us. The steps went down some twenty feet; we were in another smaller corridor. It was vaguely lighted by a glow from somewhere, and as my pupils expanded, I could see this was a shabby alley, opening ahead into a winding passage with the slide-port above us like its back gate. A warren of cubbies was here, a little sequestered segment of disreputable dwellings.

We stood peering, listening. "Shall I try the eavesdropper, Gregg?"

"Yes. No, wait!" I thought I heard distant sounds.

"Voices, Snap. Listen."

More than voices. A thud: footsteps running. A commotion, back in this warren, within a hundred feet of us.

"This way," I murmured.

We plunged into a black gash. There was a glow of light, a glassite pane in a house wall nearby. The commotion was louder, and under it now we heard a vague humming: something electrical. It was an indescribably weird sound, like nothing I had ever heard before.

Snap clutched at me. "In here, but where is the accursed door?"

There was a glassite pane, but we could find no door. In our hands we held small electronic bolt-cylinders, short-range weapons.

The hum and hissing was louder. It seemed to throb within us, as though vibration were communicating to every fiber of our bodies.

Light was streaming through the glassite pane, and we glimpsed the interior of the room. The light now came from a strange mechanism set in the center of the metal cubby. I caught only an instant's glimpse of it, a round thing of coils and wires. The metal floor of the room was cut away, exposing the gray rock of Manhattan Island. And against the rock, in a ten-foot circle, a series of discs were contacted, with wires leading from them to the central coils.

The whole was glowing with opalescent light. It was dazzling, blinding. Within in it the goggled figure of Molo was moving, adjusting the contacts. He stooped.

He straightened, drew back from the light.

Only an instant's glimpse, but we saw the girls, crouching with black bandages on their eyes. Meka, goggled like her brother, was holding them. A tall shape carrying a round black box darted through the light and ran. Molo leaped for the girls; the hum had mounted to a wild electrical scream. Molo flung his sister back out of the light.

They all vanished. There was nothing but the light, and the mounting dynamic scream.

Beside me, Snap was pounding on the glassite panel. I joined him. Everything was dreamlike, blurring as though unconsciousness was upon me.

Where was Snap? Gone? Then I saw him nearby. He had found a door, but it wouldn't yield. I saw his arm go up in a gesture to me.

He ran; I found myself running after him, but I stumbled and fell. Then over me the scream burst into a great roar of sound. It seemed so intense, so gigantic a sound that it must ring around the world.

And the light burst with an exploding puff. The black metal cubby walls seemed to melt like phantoms in a dream. A titan's blowtorch, the opalescent light shot upward, a circular ten-foot beam, eating its way through all the city levels as though they were paper, up through the city roof.

Molo's cubby was gone. His mechanism was eaten by the light and destroyed. There was only this motionless, upstanding beam, contacted here with the Earth, streaming like an opalescent sword into the starry sky.

5

I must paint now upon a broader canvas to depict the utter chaos of this most memorable night in the history of the Earth, Venus and Mars.

From that point in the bowels of Greater New York, near the southern tip of Manhattan Island, the mysterious light-beam shot up. It screamed with its weird electrical voice for an hour, so penetrating a sound that it was heard with the unaided ears as far away as Philadelphia. A titan voice it was, shrill as if with triumph. There were millions of people awakened by it this night; awakened and struck with a chill of fear at this nameless siren shrilling its note of danger. The sound gradually subsided; it seemed to reach its peak within a few minutes of the appearance of the light, and within an hour it had ceased.

But the light beam remained. Those who inspected it closely have given a clear description of its aspect; but to this day its real nature has never been determined.

It was a circular beam of about a ten-foot diameter. In color it was vaguely opalescent, rather more brilliant at night than in the day. With the coming of the sun it did not fade, but remained clearly visible, with a spectrum sheen when the

sunlight hit it so that it had somewhat the appearance of a titanic, straightened rainbow.

From that contact point with our Earth, the inexplicable beam stood vertically upward. It ate a vertical hole like a chimney up through all the city levels, through the roof and into the sky. It had a tremendous heat, communicable by contact so that it melted the city above it with a clean round hole. But the heat was non-radiant.

I was found lying within fifty feet of the base of the beam. There had been an explosion, so that Molo's metal room was gone; but from where I lay there was only a warmth to be felt from the light.

Halsey's men found me within half an hour. I was unconscious but not injured. I think now that the sound and not the light overcame me. I presently recovered consciousness; for another hour I was blind and deaf, but that quickly wore off. They rushed me through the chaos of the city to the Tappan Headquarters. Grantline was there, but not Snap. I sent them back when once I was fully conscious. They searched all the vicinity at the base of the light. Snap, alive or dead, was not to be found.

Anita and Venza were gone. I had seen Molo and Meka plunge away with them as the light-beam burst forth. They were gone, and Snap was gone.

There was, by now, a turmoil unprecedented throughout all the metropolitan area. The motionless light-beam itself had done little damage, but its appearance brought instant chaos. Within a radius of five miles of its base, the city was plunged into darkness. All power was cut off. Every vehicle, even the aeros passing overhead, and, the ventilating system stopped. Audiphones were wrecked; it subsided within an hour, though, and after that, lights and instruments brought into the area were not affected.

But during that hour, south Manhattan was in panic. A multitude of terrified people awakened in the night to find blackness and that screaming sound. The streets and corridors and traffic levels were jammed with throngs trampling and killing one another in their efforts to escape.

This was in the stricken area; but everywhere else the panic was spreading. Transportation systems were almost all out of commission. The panic spread until by dawn there was a wild exodus of refugees jamming the bridges and viaducts and tunnels, streaming from all the city exits.

This was Greater New York. But from Venus and Mars came similar reports. In Grebhar and in Ferrok-Shahn, doubtless almost simultaneous with Greater New York, similar light-beams appeared.

"But what can it be?" I demanded of Grantline. "Something Molo contacted there? He did it. That was what he was working for, and he accomplished his purpose. But what will the beam do to us?"

"It's doing plenty," said Grantline grimly.

"He didn't intend that. There was something else."

But what? As yet, no one knew. I had already told the authorities what I had seen. I was the only eye-witness to Molo's activities; and heaven knows I had but a brief, confused glimpse.

The beam remained; it streamed upward from the rock. They thought, this night, that Molo's strange current had set up a disintegration of the atoms, and that electronic particles from them were streaming into space.

The light-beam seemed impervious to attack. Within a few hours the authorities were attacking its base with various vibratory weapons but without success.

From where Grantline and I sat, we saw the dawn coming. But the radiance-beam remained unaffected. "Gregg, look there at Venus!"

To the east of us there was a distant line of metal structures surmounting the mid-Westchester hills; above them, in the brightening sky of dawn, Venus was just rising. Mars had already set at our longitude. Venus, fairly close to the Earth now, was the "Morning Star."; it mounted now above that line of metal stages in the distance.

And as Grantline gestured, I saw from Venus the same sword-like beam streaming off almost to cross our own.

Grantline and I, with a mutual thought, ran around the balcony and gazed to where Mars had set. A narrow radiance was streaming up among the stars off there.

Three swinging swords of light in the sky! With the rotation of the planets, they swept the firmament. The mysterious enemy had planted them—but why? What was coming next?

And as though to answer us, from far to the south, over mid-Jersey, came a new manifestation. We saw a speck rising, a distant mounting speck of something dark, with streamers of tiny radiance flowing from it.

"A spaceship, Gregg."

It seemed so. It came slowly from above the maze of distant structures, gathered speed, and in a moment was gone.

But others, better equipped, had observed it. It was a cylindrical projectile, with stream-fluorescence propelling it upward, an unusual form of spaceship. Telescopically it was seen until well after dawn. Speeding out in the direction of the Moon.

Molo and his weird allies had escaped, I thought. With their work done here on Earth, they were off to rejoin the hovering enemy ship 200,000 miles out.

I stood gripping Grantline on that balcony, and gazed with sinking heart. Were Anita and Venza prisoners on that mounting ship? And Snap: I prayed he was there

with the girls to lend them the protection I had failed to give.

"Haljan and Grantline wanted below."

The voice of a mechanic on the balcony behind us roused us from our thoughts. We went down through the busy building.

The workshops of Tappan Interplanetary Headquarters had for hours been ringing with busy activity. The Cometara rested upon her departure stage outside, with a score of workmen conditioning her. Newly-installed additional armament was aboard, ready to be assembled after the start. The men to handle it were embarked. My half dozen officers and the ten members of the crew I had already briefly met. They were waiting for me.

"On we go, Gregg. Let's wish ourselves luck." From grim, silent abstraction, Grantline had now sprung into his familiar dynamic self.

There was a solemn group of officers and a hundred or so workmen here; they stopped their fevered labors now to watch the Cometara get away, first of Earth's ships speeding into space to confront this nameless enemy. Grantline and I went past them with silent handshakes and murmured good-bys. I saw the towering figure of Brayley. He raised an arm for a farewell gesture to us.

We mounted the incline to the Cometara. She rested upon her stage, a great, sleek bronze ship, low and rakish, with pointed ends and a flattened, arched turtleback dome of glassite covering the superstructure and the decks from bow to stern. She lay quiescent, gleaming in the glow of the departure beacons; but there was an aspect of latent power upon her.

My ship! My first command! As we went through the opened port of the domeside and I touched foot upon the deck, I prayed that I might justify the faith reposed in me.

Men crowded the narrow, covered deck. I saw the space-guns at the deck pressure-ports, partly assembled. My chief officer, a young fellow named Drac Davidson, who with his twin brother had been in the Interplanetary Freight Service, rushed up to me.

"We're ready, sir."

"Very good, Drac."

He hurried me to the turret control room. Grantline instantly had plunged into details of assembling the weapons.

"Her ports are all closed," said Drac. He spoke calmly, but his thin face was pale and his dark eyes glowed with excitement. "The interior pressure is set at fifteen pounds. You can ring us up at once."

No formalities to this departure! With pounding heart I entered the small circular turret and mounted its tiny spiral stairs to the upper control room. But as I touched the levers, calmness came to me with these familiar tasks at which I was

skilled.

I slid a central-hull gravity-plate. It went smoothly, perfectly operated by the magnets. The vessel trembled, lifted; outside the enclosing dome I could see the dawn-light of the sky and paling floodlights of the stage. Figures of men out there, made silent gestures of farewell, dropping slowly beneath our hull as we lifted.

The bow gravity-plates slid into the repulsive-force positions. The bow lifted. The Cometara responded smoothly. We went up, poised at a forty-five degree angle. I saw the outer beacons on the stage swing upward with their warning to passing traffic in the lower lanes.

"Light our bow-beacon, Drac."

We lifted through the lower thousand and two thousand-foot lanes. The lights of Tappen were dwindling beneath us. The interior of the Cometara was humming with the whirr of its circulators and air-receivers, mingled with the throb of air pressure pumps. At three thousand feet I started the air-rocket engines. They came on with a gentle purring. The fluorescence from them streamed along our hull and down past the stern, like twin rocket tails.

With gathering speed we slid smoothly upward through the highest traffic lanes, out of the atmosphere, through the stratosphere and into space.

Leaving the stratosphere, I cut off the air-rocket engines, slid the stern gravity-plates for the Earth's repulsion and the bow plates for the attraction of the Moon and Sun. The firmament swung, in a slow arc, and steadied with the Earth behind us and the Sun and Moon in advance of our bow. We were on our course, plunging through space with accelerating velocity toward the unknown enemy ship hovering two hundred thousand miles ahead of us. My orders were to find the ship and maneuver us close to it; and Grantline's orders were to assail it.

I gazed down at the convex North Atlantic with the reddening coastline of North America spread like a map.

What was the nature of this strange enemy whom we sought? That opalescent beam from Greater New York mounted with its radiance into the dome-like starfield; the one from Venus and the other from Mars seemed crossing overhead amid the stars.

Three swords crossing the sky! What did they mean?

* * * * *

"Will you swing east or west of the Moon?"

"We haven't decided."

Drac Davidson and I were alone in the Cometara's control turret.

We were some ten hours out from Earth. Over such short astronomical distances it was impossible to attain any great velocity. When once we were clear of the Earth's atmospheric envelope, the rocket-stream engines were useless. The

Cometara was equipped also with tail-streamers of electronic nature. They exerted a slight pressure, useful for sudden curving and turning; but they had only negligible influence upon the main velocity of the vehicle.

I used the repulsion of the Earth upon our negatively charged stern gravity-plates; and with those of the bow electronified to the positive reaction, we were drawn forward by the Sun and the Moon.

For three or four hours I held to this combination with steady acceleration; but then I had to retard. In close quarters such as this, the retarding velocity must be calculated with a nicety many hours in advance.

We hung now, very nearly poised, within some forty thousand miles of the surface of the Moon. Bleak and cold, sharply black and white, it hung in a gigantic crescent in advance of our bow. The Sun, whose attraction I had ceased using some hours back, was visible sharply to one side now. Its great gas streams of giant flame licked up into the blackness of the firmament. The sunlight caught the lunar mountains with a white glare, and left the valleys black with shadow; moonlight and the mingled sunlight painted our bow. Behind our stem the great disk of Earth hung somber and glowing.

And everywhere else was the great black enclosing firmament. The stars blazed with a new white glory never seen through the haze of an atmosphere. Like a little world in the vastness of this awesome void, we hung poised.

Grantline came into the turret. "I've got everything ready, Gregg. By the gods, once you can lay telescope upon that accursed enemy ship, I'm ready to open fire on it."

"Good," I said.

But the thought of hurling our bolts at this enemy ship had struck terror into my heart for hours past. I was convinced that the three who in all the world were dearest to me—Anita, Venza, and Snap—were upon that enemy vessel.

Grantline asked, "Are you going closer to the Moon?"

"No."

"The ship couldn't be between us and the Moon. Waters and I have been in the helio room for the past hour, searching with the 'scope there. Nothing doing, Gregg. Not a sign."

"I know. Our instruments here show that."

"There might be a way of sighting them," Drac put in.

"I'll try the Zed-ray," I suggested. "Drac and I have it corrected. But I doubt if it would penetrate the sort of invisibility this enemy would use."

Grantline nodded. "Or the Benson curve-light. You think the ship went behind the Moon? Or landed on the Moon?"

"It could have done either. Has Waters still got contact with the Earth? Have

they seen it?''

''No.''

I made a sudden decision. It would take us two hours at least to make a careful scanning with the Zed-ray; and to take an elaborate series of spectro-heliographs of the Moon's surface, which might show the enemy vessel if it had landed there, was a laborious process.

After brief thought, I discarded the idea. ''We'll go to the helio room,'' I told Grantline. ''I'm going to try the Benson curve-light.''

Grantline and I left the turret, heading along the catwalk under the glassite dome toward the helio cubby where the rotund, middle-aged Waters was in charge. It made my heart sink to think of the helio room. Snap should have been there.

We crossed the transverse catwalk. The superstructure roof was under us. Farther down, the narrow decks showed with Grantline's men grouped at the firing ports, where his weapons were mounted and ready. As I saw those grouped men loitering on the deck, waiting for me to give them a sighting, I prayed I could do so; and yet there was the shuddering fear that the first blast would bring death to Anita.

Waters met us at the door of his cubby. His face was red; he mopped the perspiration from his bald head. ''I'm so glad you came! Will you want the Benson-light? I say, I've lost connection with the Earth. I had the Washington transmitter. Five minutes ago they sent me a flash of the Mars and Venus news. They both sent ships, out.''

He gasped for breath, then added in a rush: ''Both the Mars and Venus ships were destroyed and the enemy escaped!''

Grantline and I gasped with horror.

''Destroyed?'' I said. ''How?''

Waters did not know. The news came; then, immediately after, the Washington transmitter changed its wavelength and he lost connection.

''But why, in heaven's name, man, didn't you ring and tell us?'' Grantline demanded. ''Destroyed—only that! Just destroyed.''

''I was afraid to leave my instruments,'' Waters said. ''How could I tell? I might be able to renew connections with Washington any minute. Come on in. Do you want to try the Benson curve-light, Mr. Haljan?''

''Yes,'' I said. ''I do.'' We entered the dim helio cubby. ''See here, Waters, what about the projectile that ascended from Earth last night? Did the Washington observatory report what happened to it?''

''No, not a word. They lost it, evidently.''

Our 'scopes on the Cometara had not been able to locate the projectile. The

large instruments of Earth had lost it. Was that because, with tremendous velocity, it had sped directly for the new planet out beyond Mars?

Or, with some form of invisibility, might it be close to us now, just as the lurking ship might be somewhere around here?

From the little circular helio cubby, perched here under the dome like an eagle's nest, I could see down all the length of the ship, and out the side ports of the dome to the blazing firmament. The Sun, Moon and Earth and all the starfield were silently turning as Drac swung us upon our new course.

Waters bent over the projector of the Benson curve-light, making connections. The cubby was silent and dim, with only a tiny spotlight where Waters was working, and a glow upon his table where his recent messages from Earth were filed. Grantline and I glanced at them.

Panic in Greater New York, Grebhar, and Ferrok-Shahn. The three strange beams which the enemy had planted on Earth, Venus and Mars still remained unchanged. I could see them now plainly from the helio cubby windows, great shafts of radiance sweeping the firmament.

Waters straightened from his task. "That will do it, Mr. Haljan." He met me in the center of the cubby. "When you locate the enemy, do you think they'll destroy us as they did those other ships?"

Grantline laughed grimly. "Maybe so, Waters. But let's hope not."

Fat little Waters was anything but a coward, but being closed up here all these hours with a stream of dire messages from Earth had shaken him.

"What I mean, Mr. Grantline, is that prudence is sometimes better than reckless valor. The Cometara is no warship. If Earth had sent an international patrol vessel...."

Grantline did not answer. He joined me at the Benson projector. "Can we operate it from here, Gregg, or will you mount it in the bow?"

"From here. Drac's swinging. When he's on the course I gave him, I can throw the Benson-ray through the bow dome-port. Waters, you're all done in. Go below and sleep awhile."

But he stood his ground. "No, sir; I don't want to sleep."

"We've had ours," said Grantline. "We'll call you if anything shows up."

We sent Waters away. "Ready, Gregg?"

"Yes. I've got the range."

The coils hummed and heated with the current, and in a moment the Benson curve-beam leaped from the projector.

The Benson curve-light was similar to an ordinary white searchlight beam, except that its path, instead of being straight could be bent at will into various curves—hyperbola, parabola, and for its extreme curve, the segment of an el-

lipse—gradually straightening as it left its source. It was effective for police work, with hand torches for seeing around opaque obstructions. It had also another advantage, especially when used at long range: the enemy, when gazing back at its source, would under normal circumstances conceive it to be a straight beam and thus be misled as to the location of its source. Or even realizing it to be curved, one had no means of judging the angle of the curve.

A narrow white stream of light, it flung through our window-oval, forward under the dome and through the bow dome bullseye, into space. I saw the men on the deck spring into sudden alertness with the realization we were using it. The bow lookout on the forward observation bridge crouched at his 'scope-finder to help us search.

From the control turret came an audiphone buzz, and Drac's voice: "Am I headed right? The swing is almost completed."

"Finish the job and don't bother me now."

I bent over the field-mirror of the projector. On its glowing ten-inch grid the shifting image of my range was visible, a curving, brilliant limb of the Moon, with the sunlight on the jagged mountain peaks; everywhere else was the black firmament and the blazing dots of stars.

Grantline crouched beside me. "I'll work the amplifiers. Going to spread it much, Gregg?"

"Yes. A full spread first. We're in no mood for a detailed narrow search."

I gradually widened the light. Three feet here at its source, it spread in a great widening arc. With the naked eye we could see its white radiance, fan-shaped as an edge of it fell upon the Moon. And though optically it was not apparent, the elliptical curve of it was rounding the Moon, disclosing the hidden starfield to our instruments.

"Nothing yet?" I murmured.

"No."

"I'll try a narrower spread and less curve."

Grantline was searching the magnified images on the series of amplifier grids. There was nothing. For an hour we worked; then suddenly Grantline cried: "Gregg! Wait! Hold it!"

I tensed, stricken. I held the angle and the spread of light steady.

"Two seconds of arc, east; try that. The damned thing is shifting." He gripped me. "It's at the eastern edge of the field; it shifts off. It must be in rapid motion."

Then I saw it, a mere moving dot of black; but suddenly it clarified. I saw a dot which I could imagine was a shape with discs along its edge, moving with high velocity. Grantline was shifting our field to hold it.

"Got it, Gregg. By God, that's it! Now we'll see."

Then presently we saw that from its bow a very faint radiant beam was streaming. Beside me I heard Grantline gasp, "Gregg, am I crazy or is that bow beacon like the light-beam planted in Greater New York?"

There did seem to be a similarity, but thought of it abruptly was swept from my mind. Our cubby was alive with signals. Both the bow and the stern observers saw the enemy ship now with their 'scopes gazing directly along our Benson-light. And Drac was calling, "I've got the measurement of its velocity. Doubling every ten seconds. God, what acceleration!"

I flung off the Benson-light. The enemy ship had come from behind the limb of the Moon; our straight-light telescopes showed it clearly. It was heading unmistakably in our direction.

Drac was pleading, "We need velocity! Are you coming to the turret?"

"Yes."

Grantline and I rushed out upon the catwalk. Waters was mounting the spiral ladder from the deck. "Into your cubby," I shouted. "Call Earth. Keep calling until you get them."

Grantline rushed for the deck. I gained the control turret, Drac, with his thin face white and set, met me at the door. "We need velocity."

I nodded. "We'll get it, Drac; have no fear of that."

I set the gravity-plates for the greatest possible acceleration forward and added the stern rocket engines for narrow-angle maneuvering.

With gathering speed we plunged directly for the oncoming enemy ship.

6

"But there's something wrong, Drac."

"We've got grade five acceleration."

Grantline had joined us in the control turret. "How far would you say, at a rough guess, that ship is from us now?"

"Thirty thousand miles; about that." Drac scanned his page of calculations. "Impossible to gauge with any exactness; they change their pace so often and I can't figure out how large the damn thing is."

"Say they've got a forty thousand velocity; added to our ten, that's fifty."

"And we're accelerating. In half an hour we'll be within range."

"But there's something wrong," I persisted.

For several minutes now I had been aware that the Cometara was acting strangely. A sluggish response to the controls, I thought, but when I called engine chief Franklin, he had not noticed it. Yet I was certain.

Grantline stared at me. "Something wrong?"

"Yes. Drac, try orienting us. I did it ten minutes ago." I shoved him at my equa-

tions, giving the angles with the Sun, Earth and Moon which we should now have. "There's our flight course as it ought to be. Measure how we're heading, actual position. If it's what it ought to be, with the plate-combinations I'm using, then I'm crazy."

"Oh, you're just naturally apprehensive," Grantline said.

But we were not where we should be. The Cometara was off her predetermined course. And then I realized the factor of error. There was a gravitational force here for which I was not allowing. The error was not within the Cometara; she was responding perfectly. But there was a force upon her, and not that of the Sun, Earth, Moon or the distant starfield. I had calculated all of these. It was something else. Some gravitational pull, so that we were not upon the course of flight we should have been on.

"But what could be wrong?" Grantline demanded.

It was Drac who guessed it. "That radiance from the enemy's bow?"

It was that, we felt certain. Even at this thirty thousand mile distance, the bow-beacon seemed streaming upon us. We could not see that it illumined the Cometara, nor could our instruments measure any added illumination. Our flight-orbit, if held, would carry us with a swing some ten thousand miles above the South Pole of the Moon. It would cross diagonally in front of the trajectory that the enemy vessel was maintaining. But we were off our predetermined course, with a side-drift toward the enemy. That bow-beacon radiance was exerting a force upon us, a strange gravitational pull.

Grantline gasped when Drac said it. "If it's that now, what will it be when we get closer?"

The minutes were passing. The thirty thousand miles between us and the enemy was cut to ten thousand; to five. The ship was soon visible to the naked eye. Its visual movement, for all this time measurable only as a drift upon the amplified images of our instruments, now was obvious. We could see it plunging forward, could see that probably we would cross its bow. Within fifty miles? We hoped and guessed that would be the result, so that with this first passing we could use our weapons. Fifty miles of distance at combined speeds of some fifty thousand miles an hour: that would be something like three seconds from a collision. The danger of a collision, which both ships would do anything to avert, was negligible; in the immensity of space two objects so small could not strike each other, even with intention, once in a million times.

We could not calculate the passing so closely, but suddenly it seemed that perhaps the enemy could. The bow-beacon radiance, so obviously a miniature of the weird light-beams streaming from Earth, Mars and Venus, now swung away from us and was extinguished. Whatever alteration of our course the enemy had made, they seemed to be satisfied. The passing would be to their liking. Would it

be to ours?

Grantline had left the turret. He was down on the deck, ready with his men. The weapons were ready.

We had long since advanced beyond the possibility of mathematical calculations keeping pace with our changing position in relation to the enemy, but it seemed that the passing would be within fifty miles. Grantline's weapons would carry their bolt that far.

It was barely two thousand miles away now. Two minutes of time before the passing. I stared at it, a long, low ship of dark metal, red where the moonlight struck upon it. I estimated its size to be about that of the Cometara, but it was much more nearly globular. Upon its top, seeming to project from the terraced dome, was an up-pointing funnel, like the smokestack of an old-fashioned surface steam vessel; or like a great black muzzle of an old-fashioned gun. And in a row along the bulging middle of the hull there was a series of little discs.

The vessel was still a tiny blob, but every instant it was enlarging, doubling its visual size. Drac said tensely, "Fifteen hundred miles! We'll pass in a minute and a half."

I turned the angle of the stern rocket-streams. The firmament slowly began swinging; the enemy ship seemed swaying up over us. I was turning our top to it, so that Grantline might fire directly upward from both sides almost simultaneously. It might be possible, if I could roll us over at just the proper seconds.

But the enemy anticipated us. As they observed our roll, again the bow-beacon flashed on. It visibly struck us, bathed all our length in its spreading opalescent radiance.

It seemed for an instant to do nothing. Our dome did not crack; there was no shock. But our side-roll slowed. The heavens stopped their swing, and then swung back! We were upon an even keel again, the enemy level with our bow. Against the force of my turning rocket-streams this radiation had righted us. It clung a few seconds more, and again vanished.

Grantline's deck audiphone rang with his startled voice: "Gregg, roll us over! Quick! I can only fire from one side."

"I can't."

It was too late now. A few hundred miles of distance! Drac stood clutching me, staring through the port. And I stared, breathless, awaiting the results of these next few seconds.

The ships passed like crossing, speeding meteors. A few seconds of final approach; I saw the enemy vessel as an elongated, flattened globe, with a triple-terraced dome and terraced decks beneath it. That queer stack on top! The round discs, like ten-foot eyes, gleamed along the equator of the bulging hull.

One of Grantline's weapons fired a silent flash. Still out of range. The spit of our electrons leaped from our side. The enemy was untouched.

The thought stabbed at me: Anita! Not killed by that one.

Another shot from Grantline.

No result. It seemed that I saw the bolt strike. There was a reddening, a flash upon that bulging hull, but nothing more.

I was aware again of the enemy bow-beam swinging upon us. The beam was pressing us over again so that in a moment we would be hull-bottom to the enemy and Grantline could not fire.

He anticipated it. The ship was broadside to us. In the split second of that passing I saw that it was not fifty miles away, hardly ten. Grantline flung his remaining bolts. The enemy was a streaked blur going by; and all in that second it was past, reddening in the distance. Untouched by our bolts? It seemed so. The bow radiance darted ahead of it. The globular shape, unharmed, dwindled in the distance behind us.

And it had done nothing to us!

The control levers were in my hands. I would shift the gravity-plates, and make the quickest turn we could. We would go around the Moon, probably, and come back within an hour or two. Perhaps our adversary would also turn to encounter us again.

At that second I had not seen the little discs, but I saw them now! They came sailing in a line, ten foot, flat, circular discs of a dark metal; they gleamed reddish where the sunlight painted them. They had been fastened outside the enemy vessel and in our passing they had been discharged. They sailed now like whirling plates. There seemed perhaps twenty of them, heading in a curve toward us.

Grantline's voice came again from the deck audiphone. "Missed them, Gregg. That's what I thought but at least two of our bolts must have struck. But it didn't hurt them."

"No," I replied. "It seemed not. They must have a defensive barrage."

Drac was pulling at me. "Those things out there, those discs...."

Grantline demanded, "Yes, what in hell are they?"

We could not tell. It seemed that their curve would take them behind our stern. Grantline added: "Will you try going back after that ship?"

"Yes."

But I did not. To the naked eye the enemy ship had already disappeared; but with the 'scopes we saw that it seemed to be turning.

I did not attempt to turn us, for we were afraid of those oncoming discs which took all our attention. They passed within five miles astern of us, but in a great curve they swung and now seemed heading across our bow. With what tremen-

dous velocity they had been endowed by their firing mechanisms! Their elliptical curve swung them a mile or so ahead of us.

They were circling us like tiny satellites in a narrowing spiral ellipse. Our attraction, the normal gravity of our close bulk, was drawing them to us.

The men on the Cometara's deck stood gazing, surprised but not yet alarmed. The lookout calls sounded with routine notification each time the discs passed across our bow and stern. In the helio cubby, Waters was still trying to raise an Earth station.

Grantline came running to the control turret. "If those cursed things, should strike us, Gregg!"

I had set the gravity-plates into new combinations, turning our course downward, trying to swing us under the plane of the discs' orbit. But they swung downward with us; they were no more than two thousand feet away now.

Grantline said, "At the next broadside passing I'll fire at them."

Drac looked up from his calculating instruments. "Look! A circular rotation: Horribly swift. But I've caught a picture. Look!"

He had a still image of one of the discs. It had saw-teeth at its thin knife-like outer circumference. Whirling at tremendous speed, these saw-toothed metal discs might cut into our dome, or some other part of our ship.

At the next round, Grantline fired. The discs reddened a little, but came on unharmed. From the other side, he fired again. Three of the discs seemed to have been caught full. His bolts, sustained for their fullest ten seconds of duration at this close, thousand-foot range, took effect. The three discs seemed to crumble with a puff of queerly-radiant vacuum spark-glows, then were gone.

But the others came closing in.

The Cometara rang now with the excitement and alarm of the men. Grantline could not set his gauges fast enough to fire at every round.

I had a sudden thought. With the rear rockets, I rolled us over. For a moment we were hull-down to the passing discs. From our hull gravity-plates I flung a full repulsion. Would it stave them off, bend their orbit outward? It did not. Their course was unaltered.

Again Grantline was shouting at me, "Roll us back! I must fire!"

It had been an error, that rolling; Grantline lost several shots because of it. I swung us level. The discs passed within a hundred feet; half a dozen of them were still closer. Gleaming, whirling circles, thin as knife-blades; they passed close under our stern, came broadside.

These were tense, horrible seconds. The discs skimmed our bow; one seemed to miss our dome by inches. Grantline's volley annihilated four more, but there were still eight of them. They swung in at our stern.

I was aware of confusion throughout the Cometara. The crew and stewards were running up to the bow quarter-deck. My second officer stood there, stricken. The stern lookout screamed his futile warning.

Useless! I saw one of the discs strike our stern dome, then another. Still others. They were silent blows, but it seemed that I could feel them cutting into the dome-plates.

The dome was cracking! Then, after that horrible instant, came the sound: crunch, a rumble; the grind of crushed and breaking metal; then the puff and surge of the outward explosion.

I saw the whole tip of the stern dome cracking, bursting outward, forced by our interior air pressure. And over all the Cometara the outgoing air was sucking and whining with a growing rush of wind.

I shouted, "Drac! Close the stern bulkhead!"

I set the word-buttons for the distress siren, and pulled the lever. Its voice screamed over the uproar. "Keep forward! Take the space-suits! Prepare to abandon ship!"

7

In the midst of the chaos I was aware that all the remaining discs struck us upon the port stern quarter. The broken dome of the stern showed a jagged hole, but the up-sliding cross-bulkhead partially shut it off. Two or three of the crew and the stern lookout were gone behind that closing bulkhead. Their bodies in a moment would be blown into space.

"It may hold, Drac. Order Waters out of his cubby. Forward!"

I was calling the engine-room. "Order your men up by the bow, not the stern." But I got no answer from the engine-chief.

I raised Grantline. "Order your men forward: Clear amidships! I want to close the central bulkheads. If the stern one breaks with the pressure...."

"Right, Gregg. Are we lost?"

"God knows! We'll know in a minute or two. Get all your men into their space-suits. Keep in the bow. Prepare the exit-port there."

"Right, Gregg. You coming down?"

"Yes. When I finish." I cut him off. "Drac, get out of here! Did you order Waters forward?"

"He won't leave."

"Why the hell not?"

"He thinks he may be able to get communication with Earth."

"He can't stay where he is; there's no protection up here! When that stern bulkhead goes...."

It was breaking. I could see it bending sternward under the pressure. And at best it was leaking air, so that the decks were a rush of wind. Already Drac and I were gasping with the lowered pressure.

"Drac, get out of here. Go get Waters; bring him forward. The hell with his transmitter: this is life or death!"

"But you?"

"I'm coming down. From the forward deck, call the hull control rooms. Order everybody forward and to the deck."

"What about the pressure pumps?"

"I can keep them going from here."

I set the circulating system to guide the fresh air forward, but it was futile against the sucking rush of wind toward the stern. As the pumps speeded up I saw, with the little added pressure, the great cross panel of the stern bulkhead straining harder. It would go in a moment.

Drac was clinging to me. "Tell me what to do!"

"I've told you what to do!" I shoved him to the catwalk. "Get out of here. Get Waters forward. Get the men out of the hull."

His anguished eyes stared at me; then he turned and ran forward on the catwalk. I saw him forcibly dragging the bald-headed Waters from the helio cubby. It was the last time I ever saw either of them.

A buzzer was ringing in the turret, and I plunged back for it. The exertion put a band of pain across my chest, a panting constriction from the lowering pressure.

Fanning, assistant engineer, was still at the pressure pumps. His voice came up: "Pumps and renewers working. Will you use the gravity shifters?"

"Hell, no! Get out of there, Fanning. We're smashed. Air going. It's a matter of minutes—abandoning ship. Get forward!"

Suddenly the stern bulkhead cracked with a great diagonal rift. I waited a moment to give them all time to get forward; then I slid all the cross 'midship bulkheads.

It was barely in time. The stern bulkhead went out with a gale of wind, but the barrier amidships stemmed it. Half of the vessel sternward was devoid of air, but here in the bow we could last a little longer. Beneath me I could see Grantline's men—some of them, not all—and a few of the stewards, crew and officers, crowding the deck, donning space-suits. The two side chambers were ready; half a dozen men crowded into each of them. The deck doors slid closed. The outer ports opened; helmeted, goggled, bloated figures were blown by the outgoing air from the chamber into space. Then the outer slides went closed. The pumps filled up the chambers; the deck doors opened again. Another batch of men....

I saw Grantline, suited but with his helmet off, dashing from one side of the deck to the other, commanding the abandonment.

The central bulkheads seemed momentarily holding. Then little red lights in the panel board before me showed where in the hull corridors the doors were leaking, cracking, giving away, breaking under the strain. The whole ribbed framework of the vessel was strained and slued. The bulkhead sides no longer set true in the casements. Air was whining everywhere and pulling sternward.

It was the last stand; I was aware that the alarm siren had ceased. There was a sudden stillness, with only the shouts of the remaining men at the exit-ports mingling with the whine of the wind and the roaring in my head. I felt detached, faraway; my senses were reeling.

I staggered to the gauges of the Erentz system, the system whereby an oscillating current, circling within the double-shelled walls of hull and dome, absorbed into negative energy much of the interior pressure. The main walls of the vessel were straining outward. The Cometara could collapse at any moment. I started for the catwalk door. The electro-telescope stood near it and I yielded to a vague desire to gaze into the eyepiece. The instrument was still operative. I swept it sternward.

The enemy ship had not vanished. By what strange means, I cannot say, its velocity had been checked. A few thousand miles from us, it was making a narrow, close-angle turn. Coming back? I thought so.

I suddenly realized my intention of having all the gravity-plates in neutral before abandoning the ship. I seized the controls now. An agony of fear was upon me that the shifting valves would fail. But they did not. The plates slid haltingly, reluctantly.

I recall staggering to the catwalk. It seemed that the central bulkhead was breaking. There were fallen figures on the deck beneath me. I stumbled against the body of a man who had tangled himself in the stays of the ladder rail and was hanging there.

I think I fell the last ten feet to the deck. The roaring in my ears, the bands tightening about my chest encompassed all the world.

Then I was on my feet again, and I stumbled over another body. It was garbed in a space-suit, with the helmet beside it. I stripped it of the suit. I was panting, with all the world whirling in a daze, bursting spots of light before my eyes.

Ten feet away down the deck was the opened door of the pressure chamber. A bloated figure came into my dreamlike vista, moving for the pressure door. It turned, saw me, came leaping and bent over me. I saw behind the vizor that it was Grantline. His bloated, gloved hands helped me don my suit.

He helped me with my helmet. The metal tip on Grantline's gloved hand touched the contact-plate on my shoulder. His voice sounded from the tiny

audiphone grid within my helmet. "Gregg! Thank God I found you! All right?"

"Yes." My head was clearing.

"I've got the chamber ready. We're the last, Gregg."

I gripped his shoulder. "You're sure there's nobody else?"

"No. I've been everywhere I could reach. The central bulkheads are almost gone."

He pushed me into the pressure chamber. There was hardly need to close the door after us. I stood gripping him as he opened the small outer slides. The abyss was at our feet; the outgoing wind tore at us like a gale, so that we stood gripping the casements.

"Thank God you've got a power-suit, Gregg. So have I. We must keep together."

"Yes."

I could feel the floor grid of the chamber shuddering beneath my feet. The Cometara was cracking, bursting outward throughout her length; at any instant she might collapse.

For a moment we stood poised. Beneath us, here at the brink were millions upon millions of miles of emptiness, the remote, unfathomable void. Blazing worlds down there in the black darkness.

"Good-by, Gregg. It may be the end for us."

"Good luck, Johnny."

His bloated figure dropped away from me. I waited just an instant, and then I dove into space.

For a moment there was a chaos of strangeness, the wrench to my sense of the transition. I had been the inhabitant of a little world, the Cometara, with a gravity beneath my feet. Now, in a breath, I had no world to inhabit. I was alone in space. No gravity; nothing solid to touch; emptiness.

I was in a world to myself, and the abnormality of it brought a mental shock. But in a moment the adjustment came. I passed the transition, the sense of falling.

The firmament steadied and my senses cleared. My dive from the Cometara carried me in a slow arc some three hundred feet away. There had been a sense of falling, but no actual fall. My velocity was retarded, with the mass of the Cometara pulling at me. I went like a toy boat in water shoved by a child, quickly slowing. In a few moments, the velocity was gone, and I hung poised. I saw Grantline's bloated form not over fifty feet from me. He waved an arm at me.

Out here in the void I lay weightless, as though upon an infinitely soft feather bed. I could kick, flounder, but not endow myself with motion. I craned my neck, gazed around through the bulging vizor pane.

The Earth and the Sun hung level with the white star-dots strewn everywhere.

I could not see that unknown light-beam from Greater New York; it was shafting out now in the other direction, so that the Earth hid it from me. Venus was visible to one side of the Sun. The enemy light-stream from Grebhar was apparent; and as I turned my body and bent double to look behind me, I saw Mars and the sword-like ray from Ferrok-Shahn. The beams streamed off like the radiance of the Milky Way, faintly luminous but seemingly visible for an infinite distance.

The Cometara was obviously falling now toward the Moon, drawn irresistibly, and all of us with her, toward the lunar surface. It seemed so close, that black and white mountainous disc. We were, I suppose, some twenty thousand miles from it, gathering speed as it pulled at us. But that motion was not apparent now. Distance dwindled all these celestial motions, so that all the firmament seemed frozen into immobility.

But there was some motion. Twenty or more bloated figures, the survivors from the wreck of the Cometara, were encircling it in varying orbits, revolving around it like tiny satellites. Some were closing in, drawn against it. I saw one plunge against the wrecked dome, and begin crawling like a fly. And I found that the forces of the firmament were molding my orbit also. My outward plunge was checked. I poised for an indeterminate instant, and then I took my orbit. I too, was a satellite of the Cometara.

I gazed at the wreck of the Cometara. My ship! My first command! So smoothly, confidently rising from the Earth only a few hours ago; and she had come to this. She lay askew in the heavens. The dome was cracked throughout all its length and smashed like a shell at the sterntip.

I could see the interior litter beneath the dome, the twisted and strained lines of the hull. A dead ship now, the mechanisms stilled; dead and silent inside, with all the warmth gone out of it. All the air dissipated, so that in every cubby, every dark corridor of that broken hull there was the coldness and silence of interplanetary space.

I suppose these thoughts swept me within a few seconds. I saw myself starting to revolve in my orbit. Perhaps my motion would carry me around indefinitely; or I might be drawn down to the vessel as those other survivors had been drawn.

Grantline, with one of the few power suits, was coming toward me now, with tiny fluorescent streams back along his body from his shoulder blades. I switched on my own mechanism. It moved me toward him, and our gravity attracted us. We shut off the power when twenty feet apart; drifted together; contacted; bounced apart like rubber balls as our inflated suits struck. Then in a moment we had drifted back and clung.

I touched the metal plate of his shoulder. "Working all right?"

"Yes. Thank God for this much, Gregg. I wonder how many are alive."

In the chaos of the abandonment, many of the men's air mechanisms had failed

to operate. It is always so in times of disaster. We could see, revolving around the wreck, and motionless against its dome, those horrible flabby, deflated suits where the delicate Erentz mechanism had failed. Within was only a corpse.

"Too many," I said. "And not more than four or five of us with power. What shall we do first? Round them up? We must all get together."

His answering voice was grim. "We can tow them from the wreck. Six or seven of us altogether have power. Do you suppose we can get away, Gregg? Get loose from the ship before she falls?"

Only trying it could tell us that. The Cometara, and all of us with her, were plunging for the Moon. We would seek out the men who were alive and tow them in a string. If we could break the gravity pull of the ship, and then struggle upward from the Moon, we could maintain ourselves here in space until some rescue ship from Earth, Venus or Mars would come and pick us up.

"You take one side, Gregg; I'll take the other. Don't go aboard; she might collapse."

"I'll pick up the men without power and alive. The others with power suits will do the same. Then we'll meet out here, about where we are now?"

"Yes. And hurry, Gregg! Every mile toward the Moon makes it that much harder. We're falling fast."

"Good luck!" I shoved away from him. And within a minute, as he went in an arc toward the Cometara bow and I toward her stern, I suddenly thought of that returning enemy vessel. My last look through the 'scope had shown that she was returning; and then I had forgotten it.

My gaze swept the firmament now. I had no 'scope instruments within the helmet. With the naked eye the enemy ship was not in sight. But I knew that meant little; within a moment she could come in view and be here if she were going at any great velocity.

There were on the Cometara, at the time of the disaster, some sixty-odd men; perhaps forty had gotten away. And I could see very soon that not more than fifteen, or less, out here were alive. Two with power were ahead of me now, slowly floating past the wrecked dome of the stern. One had picked up two others, found them alive and was towing them out. They went past me, moving very slowly so that I could see that two were all that one of us could tow and attain any velocity at all.

I contacted with the leader. He was one of Grantline's men.

"Two or three hundred feet out," I directed. I gestured. "Grantline said to meet out there. I'll tow others."

"Yes. Around the stern you'll find—God! Haljan, look!"

A mile from us the enemy ship was in view. Passing—no! Stopping! With in-

credible retardation she had plunged into view, was here, and yet had no great forward velocity. She seemed no more rapid than a great air liner winging past, so close that her reddish-tinged bulging hull length showed clearly. The discs were gone. The funnel set on top of her was sloped diagonally toward us as she rolled on her side, so that momentarily I could see down into it. There was some mechanism down there. The bow radiance was a narrow opalescent beam in advance of the bow.

"Slowing, Haljan!"

"Yes, stopping. Don't try to meet Grantline. Tow your men away!"

"Or should we board the Cometara and hide?"

"No. They've come back to bombard her."

I kicked at him violently. With his two drifting figures clinging behind, he swung past me. I headed behind the stern. Upon its dangling framework several of our men were glued, lying there inert. I caught a glimpse of the interior of the stern, the littered deck; men lying there had been stricken before they had time to get into their suits.

On the outside, forward, I saw Grantline come rounding the bow, towing a figure and heading for another. On the outside of the bow-peak a group of others were perched, gesticulating for help. I started that way; then I saw another, and nearer figure in a power suit heading for them. I swung back. There were two figures on the outside of the under-hull whom I could more quickly reach. Inverted flies. Their feet were on the keel. They stooped and waved toward me.

I took a swoop. Passing close down the hull, my rocket-streams struck the hull plates and gave me sudden downward velocity. I shot down, out past the keel. And again I saw the enemy ship. She hung poised, no more than two miles away. And as I looped over, with all the black, star-strewn firmament in a dizzy whirl, the great Moon-disc, first above, and then below me, I saw the bow-beam of the enemy swinging. It came to the Cometara, and there it clung.

I had gone perhaps fifty feet below the keel with my dive when I righted. I was mounting. I saw the opalescent ten-foot circle of the beam moving along the Cometara hull. It seemed to do no damage; then suddenly it darted down and clung to me.

I felt nothing save the impact of a gentle push, something shoving with a ponderable force against me.

I saw the Cometara receding, the heavens swinging as I turned over. The red disc of the distant Earth swooped. The Moon surface momentarily seemed rotating and lifting above me.

I was helpless, rolling, then whirling end-over-end. Then again I steadied. The beam was gone from me.

I saw the Cometara, a full mile away from me! The enemy ship was again in motion, moving toward me, and between the Cometara and the Earth. And the beam was steady upon the Cometara's mid-section.

The Cometara had a new velocity now. I could not miss it. She was dwindling rapidly in visual size; relative to me, she was receding, falling upon the Moon. More than that she was being pushed downward by the repulsive force of the strange enemy beam upon her. I stared, as with all the little dots which were our men around and upon her, she went down into the void.

I found myself presently alone up here, with the enemy ship hovering nearby. Its maneuvering to thrust the wrecked Cometara toward the Moon had brought it within a mile of me. The bow-beam was still on the Cometara; and then abruptly it vanished.

The Cometara had almost dwindled beyond the sight of my unaided vision. By chance, undoubtedly, the beam had fallen upon me and thrust me from the wreck. I was alone up here now with the enemy, but they may not have noticed me, or cared. I found my power mechanism intact. I turned it on; slowly, like a log in water, I began moving away.

A minute. Five minutes. The Cometara was lost. Grantline, all the men, were lost; with that added downward thrust they could never free themselves from the falling wreck.

I was jerked out of my thoughts by the sight of an oncoming red blob. Something was coming from the enemy ship, red with the sunlight and earthlight, silvered by the Moon and the stars. It took form. It was a disc, another of those cursed whirling discs, sent to annihilate me!

Then, when it was a quarter of a mile away, I saw that it was a disc which was turning slowly. Rocket radiances came from its rotating circumference; it came sailing directly at me, so swiftly that my own velocity was futile.

Another minute and I was caught. I saw that the disc was some fifteen feet in diameter, and that it bulged, so that within its convex floor and ceiling was a space of several feet.

I cut off my power and with pounding heart lay waiting. The space-suit had no weapons for equipment save a knife hung in the belt. I drew it out, held it in my gloved fingers.

The disc sailed upon its level, vertical axis. Its rotation slowed; I saw little windows set around its convex middle. It came up and bumped me with its metal side. I kicked away, shoved off. Shapes were moving in a dim interior light behind the port-panes. Little hand-beams of radiance darted out. They seemed to seize me, draw me.

I found myself glued helplessly to the convex outer surface of the disc. The rotation gathered speed again, but I looked presently only at the gleaming sur-

face to which I was pinned. Had I been a metal bar upon the horns of an electromagnet, I could not have been more helpless.

An interval passed. With the contact plate of my fingers against this hull it seemed that I could hear voices within, strange, indistinguishable words. I twisted, but could not see into the port.

Again the rotation was slowing. The near shape of the enemy vessel swung close and past; and again and again I saw that we were over it, dropping down into the wide black opening of the funnel-top. It yawned presently like a great black tunnel, into which we fell.

The jar of landing knocked me loose, and no doubt the attraction radiance also released me. I fell another space, bounced up and sank back. I thought that something like a sliding port-door closed over me.

And then, in the dimness, figures were gripping me. I lashed and struck, but the knife was wrenched away.

I was a prisoner in a pressure-port of the enemy ship!

8

It seemed that the small room had a very faint radiance showing through my vizor pane. Narrow enclosing walls were visible. It was a triangular-shaped space, fifteen feet or so down one side, with a concave ceiling overhead. I was lying on the floor. The darkness at first had been impenetrable. The figures which had flung me down and seized my knife were gone; I had not seen them nor where they went.

For a moment I lay cushioned by my bloated suit. When I struggled to my feet, I was almost weightless. The movement of getting upright flung me upward as though I were a tossed feather. My helmet struck the metal ceiling, so sharp a blow that I feared for an instant I had smashed the helmet.

From the ceiling, with flailing arms and legs, I sank back to the grid-floor; and in a moment I was able to stand upright with so slight a feeling of weight that I could have been a bit of thistle ready to blow away in the least wind.

There was, as I stood there balancing myself, a queer feeling of triumph within me. A triumphant hope; for coming down in the ship's capacious funnel—larger than it had seemed from a distance—I had seen what appeared to be a small projectile, resting in some strange landing gear. The disc bearing me had settled on a stage alongside it. Was that the projectile from Earth?

A growing air pressure was around me; the tiny Erentz dials within my helmet had been immovable, but now they were showing outside pressure. I stood waiting. Whatever sounds were here I could not tell. Then presently the dials stopped. They registered seventeen pounds—whatever that might mean here. I loosed the helmet and took it off.

With the first gasping breath my senses reeled. I sank to the floor, and though I tried to replace the helmet, it was too late. My thoughts were fading. A strange chemical odor was in my nostrils. It was like breathing a thin, perfumed water.

The drifting away was pleasant.

Tortured dreams came with my awakening. I found myself in the same dim room upon the floor. I could breathe better now, and in a few more hours the strangeness had almost gone. I found now that I was not injured, but I was ravenously hungry.

Again, gingerly as before, I stood up and slid my space-suit from me; and now I was aware of movement and sound. The floor-grid vibrations were apparent. And there was a dim, distant, tiny throbbing; it was much like the interior of the Cometara while in flight.

And there were other sounds, indescribably faint, yet strangely clear. I thought they might be distant voices.

I took a cautious step. I could see a dim blank wall nearby with what seemed a bowl-like article of furniture on the floor against the wall. For all my caution, I sailed upward; but this time I held my balance. And I found that with my negligible weight, I could almost swim in this strange air! I hit the wall and slid slowly down it to the floor again, like a man sinking to the bottom of a tank.

It suddenly occurred to me to put my ear against the wall. At once the sounds all became incredibly louder. It was a confusion of sound: the mechanisms of the vessel, some of which I thought I could identify, and some not; the strange swish and thump of what might have been people moving; and there were voices.

The voices seemed mingled babble coming from everywhere. The timber of the sound was very strange. It held no suggestion of how far away from me the voices might be. There were so many of them I could only think they were scattered about the ship; and yet they all seemed together. After a moment, the blend was less confusing. Again, very strangely my hearing seemed able to separate one from the other.

I was to learn that the atmosphere handled sound vibrations differently from that of Earth. Voices had a muffled tone, as though they were smothered. There was undoubtedly a vibrational distortion; and a sound-wave speed slower than Earth's normal-pressure rate of 1,050 feet a second, perhaps as slow as 700. Yet sounds remained audible over longer distances than on Earth.

In this instance now, as I listened with my ear to the wall of the ship, I was hearing all its sounds picked up and carried by the metal.

Now I heard a strange tongue: two types of voices, slow, measured, carefully-intoned phrases, and voices of a curiously sepulchral, hollow sound. My mind went back to the Red Spark restaurant room.

And suddenly I realized that amid the babble I was hearing English. A man's

voice, talking English. I caught, very clearly the phrase:

"Master, yes. She means well. Can you not see it?"

Molo's voice! Then the girls must be here also.

Another voice: "I am not sure. Perhaps. The Great Intelligence will talk with her when we are arrived." It was the slow measured voice of one of the brains.

"When will that be? Pretty soon now, won't it, Molo?"

Venza! A great wave of thankfulness swept me. And then I heard Anita. "Your two captives, where are they? You're not going to kill them, are you?"

"No," said Molo. "Perhaps not. No one has inspected the new one yet. The other is being cared for. The Great Intelligence will question him when we arrive."

"We are arriving," said Venza. "That's your world, Wandl, down there, isn't it?"

"Yes. We are dropping fast."

The voice of the brain: "Come, Wyk. The instruments are showing events on our captured worlds. Take me to watch. I am tired of movement."

"Yes. Master."

It seemed that the brain was being carried away; Molo and the two girls were being left alone. I had thought at first that they were in the adjacent room to me, but they could have been far distant. They had mentioned two captives. One, obviously, was myself. Was the other Snap?

"Come," Molo was saying, "stand here with me and we will watch this world. Not mine, Venza chia, as you just called it, But my adopted world. And it will be yours, until we rule the new Mars."

I heard them moving to gaze through the window-port. Then came Anita's voice: "If it's anything like this ship, it will be very strange."

"Strange indeed, little dove. I was there only once, a month ago, and for a few hours only. The Great Intelligence, as they call him, talked with me, absorbing my knowledge: they call it that. And he was much impressed by me, and made very wonderful promises in exchange for my fidelity. And for my sister, too."

I learned further how Molo and Meka became identified with the Wandlites; it was as we had suspected.

"You will rule Mars?" Venza was saying. "When this is over, you mean you will really be given Mars to rule?"

"I would rather live on the Earth," said Anita. "There was a young man there."

"He will not be there much longer." Molo laughed. "You are very lucky that I fancy you!"

"Lucky indeed," Venza echoed. "No death for me. I'm too young."

"But all those millions dead. It seems so terrible."

"It is, for them!" Molo was in high good humor, pleased with himself and with these girls. "See down there; that blurring is the heavy air. We're almost down into it now."

I heard the sound of someone joining them, and then the hollow voice again: "Molo! Bad tidings come from Mars. One of the Masters was captured there in Ferrok-Shahn. They tortured him as they did the one on Earth. But he did not die unyielding. He spoke and told our plans!"

"Hah! Did I not advise you to keep those helpless things on Wandl?"

"But it is done now. The worlds know our purpose. They are preparing spaceships. Already some are rising from Ferrok-Shahn, from Grebhar and from Greater New York."

"We knew they were doing that."

"But now they know our purpose. The Master Intelligence fears that they will come raiding Wandl. Our vessels are being made ready to go out and repel them."

The hollow voice ceased.

"Your purpose discovered?" asked Anita. "What does that mean? Won't you tell us now? Twin queens for your future Mars, and you treat us like children!"

"That light-beam he so cleverly planted in Greater New York," Venza hinted.

"Yes, I will tell you. Without me in New York and my men who went with these Wandlites to Ferrok-Shahn and Grebhar, the vital gravity beams could never successfully have been planted. The apparatus was complicated; you saw it. You saw the labor I had making the contact?"

"But what are the light-beams for?"

I listened, breathless, as he told them. The electronic beams could not be destroyed; a disintegration of the rock atoms had been set up. With each rotation of the Earth it was sweeping the sky. From a great control station, Wandl was flinging attraction gravity upon that beam, using it as a monstrous lever upon the rotation of Earth. With every daily passage now the force was being exerted. The rotation was slowing. In a few days it would stop, with the end of the beam drawn to Wandl and held there.

And the beams from Grebhar and Ferrok-Shahn were the same. Three giant chains! Then Wandl, traveling of its own gravitational volition, would withdraw from our solar system. The gravitational chains would pull the Earth, Venus and Mars after it!

Titanic tow-ropes! The destruction, not of our worlds, but of all life upon them, for the cold of interstellar space would leave no living organism. Three dead worlds; Wandl would draw them to her own Sun and then free them, send them, with new orbits, around the distant blazing star. Three new worlds brought home

triumphantly by Wandl to join the little family of inhabited planets revolving around this other Sun. Three fair and lovely worlds, warmed back by the other sunlight to be green mansions untenanted, ready to receive the new beings who would come and possess them.

9

"You, Snap!"

"Gregg! But how...?"

"Hush! They might hear us."

"They can do more than that. They can almost hear you think."

"Anita and Venza are here."

"I know it. I was with them for a time. This accursed gravity! I can't walk."

"Careful," I whispered. "You can crack your head on something with the least false step. Are they taking us ashore?"

"I guess so. How did you happen...?"

"Tell you later."

They had come for me in that dark pressure-port, taken me along a dim corridor of the ship, which evidently had landed a few moments before. Then Snap, with strange figures around him, had been flung at me.

These weird beings! The brains were here, but not many; I saw half a dozen on the ship. They could move easily now. They bounced upon their small arms and legs, hitching with little leaps of a few feet. Close at hand they were gruesome; from a distance they had the aspect of thirty-inch ovoids, bouncing of their own volition. And I saw too that underneath, toward the back, was a shriveled body.

The other figures were wholly different; they seemed at first to be ten-foot, upright insects. The two legs were like stilts, the body narrow but with bulging chest. The neck was thin, holding the small round head, about the size of my own.

Words seem futile to picture this thing which was a man of Wandl. There was no skin, but instead what seemed to be a glossy, hard brown shell. It was laid in scales; and upon the legs was a brown fuzz of stiff hair. There were many joints, both of the legs and the torso. Clothing was worn; a single garment, hanging from a wide belt halfway down the legs seemed incongruous, fantastically aping humanity.

This was the worker, equipped by nature for mechanical tasks. There were not two arms, but at least ten. From what could have been called the shoulders, they were tentacles, half the length of an elephant's trunk, with many-fingered hands at the ends. From the waist depended huge lobster-like pincers; and from the chest and back the arms were smaller, each with a different type finger-claw.

The head and face were most of all a personal mocking of mankind. Wide,

upstanding, listening ears were upon the sides of the head, one on the forehead and one on the back. The face was mobile, with tiny brown scales small as a fish. A nose orifice, with two protruding brown eyes above it was set outward on stems, and an upended slit of a mouth. There was an eye in the back of the head.

Probably, over eons of upward development from what was perhaps an original single type, these two specialized forms had developed. The "Masters," as they were known upon Wandl, neglected the body for the brain, and the "Workers," the reverse. There was no separate individual for the female. As is the case with primitive organisms, they were all bi-sexual, the parent dying in the reproduction of offspring.

Of necessity I have been forced into digression. But at the time, Snap and I clung together, whispering, as a group of workers pushed us down a descending incline. Snap, back there in Greater New York when Molo's contact light had burst into existence, had fallen, half unconscious. They picked him up. Molo was going to kill him, but the girls persuaded him to take Snap with them.

"Anita and Venza pretended never to have seen me before," Snap whispered to me now. "You take the same line."

"If we get with them."

"We will."

It was weird, this landing upon Wandl. We had left the vessel's side-port and were descending what seemed a narrow, hundred-foot landing incline. We were outdoors, and it was night. Shafts of colored radiance flashed around us. The ship was poised on a disc-like platform, with skeleton legs. It seemed a hundred feet or more down to the ground level from where the colored lights were darting up. Overhead was a cloudless, purple-red sky of blurred, reddish stars. No doubt the curious atmosphere of Wandl gave the sky and stars this abnormal look.

Later, what a multiplicity of obscure wonders we were to glimpse upon Wandl! The slowing rotation of the Earth caused climatic changes there, volcanic and tidal disturbances, but Wandl rotated and stopped at will. Undoubtedly she was equipped to withstand the shock. Her internal fires could not break into eruption; she had very little fluid surface. And the nature of her atmosphere was such that it was not easily disturbed into storms. Only if there was laxity in the handling of the planet's motion would a storm come.

But now, questions pounded at me. Earth, Venus and Mars were to be towed into interstellar space; all life on our worlds would perish in the cold of that stellar journey. Yet Wandl had made that journey. Was her atmosphere inherently such that it did not transmit rays of heat?

Snap and I had been pushed down the incline with half a dozen figures in advance of us. Without difficulty we could have leapt down that hundred feet, unaided. Figures were leaping into mid-air from several pressure-ports of the ship.

They did not fall, but floated, drifted down. I saw one of the insect-like workers drop with motionless outstretched arms. Others came mounting up, using their arms and legs with sweeping strokes, as though swimming. It was like being under water.

It was a strange, weird scene, the vessel wavering above us; the flashing lights; waving beams of radiance. A fantastic structure nearby reared itself several hundred feet with lights on top and outlining its many lateral balconies one above the other. The air was full of the leaping, swimming insect-like figures. The brains, the masters, were not in evidence; then I saw one of them being carried, and others, floating down like distended falling balloons, to be caught by the workers in small nets and thus saved from jarring contact.

Snap was suddenly whispering: "That fellow back of us is our guard. I can feel his ray. Some form of attraction; it's pulling at me."

Snap was a little behind me. I turned and saw the faint radiance of a narrow light-beam upon him. It came from an instrument in an upper shoulder hand of the insect figure following us, no doubt the reverse form of the same ray which had been used to thrust the wrecked Cometara toward the Moon.

We reached the bottom. I saw now that the group of workers in advance of us were carrying metal cubes, seemingly of considerable weight; they also had to use the incline.

We stood presently on a smooth ground surface. We had not seen Anita and Venza, nor Molo and his sister. The insect figure who was our guard came forward. "You stand here. Molo comes."

"Where is he?" I demanded. "I want to see him." I stopped myself quickly; I had very nearly mentioned the girls. "And talk with him."

"He comes soon."

"I'm hungry." I gestured to my stomach. "Food. You know what that is?"

The brown scaly face contorted for a smile, a ghastly grimace. "Yes. You shall have food and drink."

It seemed that the hollow voice came not from the neck but from the shell-like, bulging chest. He stood aside, with the globular weapon of the ray in a pincer hand.

We waited, standing gingerly together, wavering with our slight weight. A wind would have blown us away, but there was no wind. Instead, there was a heavy, sultry air, warm as a mid-summer Earth night, warmer even than the Neo-time of Venus.

Snap and I were dressed much the same, wearing heavy boots, for which weight we were thankful, tight, puttee-like trousers, flaring at the top, and high-necked white blouses. Both of us were bare-headed. Doubtless we were as fan-

tastic a sight to these Wandlites as they to us. Some of the workers crowded up, reaching out to pluck at us, but Snap waved them away and our guard dispersed them.

One of the master brains came bouncing up. Upon his little upright body the great head wavered.

"You will wait here." His eyes glowed up at us.

"But listen," Snap began.

"You will wait here for the Martian. He has his orders to take you to the Great Intelligence." The little arm from the side of the head had a hand with a finger pointing for a gesture. "There is a meeting place there. We decided now what to do to destroy the warships of your worlds. I do not like your thoughts; they are black. I will inform the Great Intelligence when he can spare the thought for you."

He added something in the Wandl tongue. A worker came forward; lifted him carefully, held him in the hollow of an encircling tentacle. And with a bound, the worker sailed upward and was gone.

Again we stood through an interval. I noticed now that the towering structure near us, with its storied balconies, was not perpendicular. Its front curved up and back. It was convex, somewhat in the fashion of an irregular globe, a three-hundred foot ball, with a flattened base set here on the ground. The balconies were segments of its front curve. At the top, the roof was as though the ball had been sliced off, like a giant apple with a slice gone for a base and another for the roof. At the bottom was a huge portal with a glow of light from within. And at the terraced balcony levels were lighted windows.

"Is that the meeting place?" Snap whispered.

"Probably. And look to the side of it, Snap."

It was a city. There was a vista of distance to one side of the great globe structure. Now that our eyes were more accustomed to the queerness of this night upon Wandl, we could ignore the colored light-beams of the landing stage and the disembarking palisade upon which we were standing. Gazing into the distance, the curvature of the surface of this little world was immediately apparent. The reddish firmament of stars came down to meet the sharply-curving surface at a horizon line which seemed about a mile away.

Spread upon this near distance were a variety of structures with little roads of open space winding between them. Most of the buildings seemed globular in shape. Some were small, little round mound-shaped individual dwellings. Others were larger. Some were tiered like half a dozen apples speared in a row upon a stick and set upright.

I saw a ribbon of what might be a river in the distance, with the reddish starlight glinting upon it. To our left, half a mile away perhaps, was a row of buttes and rocks which stood like a miniature range of mountains. The city seemed entirely

to encompass them; and every little rock-peak had upon its top a globelike dwelling.

Lights were winking everywhere and figures bounded a hundred feet and more, and sailed in an arc, coming down to the ground to bound again. A row of workers went by overhead, not swimming or leaping but stiffly motionless. Tiny opalescent rays went from them to the ground, as though to give them power.

Five minutes of Earth-time might have passed while Snap and I gazed at this busy night scene in this Wandl city upon the occasion of the landing of their ship so triumphantly returned from its mission to Earth. As I stood, certainly a helpless captive if ever there was one, nevertheless a strange sense of my own power was within me.

This was so small a world; the people were so flimsy. With a poke of my fist I could kill any one of these master brains. The ten-foot workers seemed mere shells, light and fragile; even the buildings were light and flimsy. The little globe-houses on their sticks seemed to waver, almost like nodding flowers. If we ran amuck we could smash everything we saw here on Wandl.

We became aware of Molo approaching. What a solid giant this seven-foot Martian seemed now in the midst of this buoyant, almost weightless city! He was still bare-headed and wearing his garments of ornamented leather, with his brawny legs bare. Upon his feet were strange-looking, wide-soled shoes. His hands and forearms were thrust into loops of small shields. These shields appeared to be constructed of a heart-shaped flexible framework, covered with an opaque membrane. They were about two feet long and half as wide. With a hand and forearm thrust into fabric loops, the shield appeared to serve as wings so that the arms had more thrust against the air. He came at us with a sort of swimming stroke. He landed somewhat awkwardly, half-stumbled and almost fell, but gathered himself up and confronted us.

He gained his balance and waved our guard aside. His gaze went to me.

"You are the new prisoner taken from that wrecked Earth-ship?"

"Yes."

"What is your name? You are an Earthman, evidently."

"Yes." I hesitated. I had seen Molo and heard him talk, back there in Greater New York; but he had not seen me nor heard of me probably.

"Gregg Haljan." I added, "I am a skilled navigator; perhaps it was fortunate you saved me."

He flung me a look and there was a tinge of amusement in it. "You would save your own skin now?"

"Why not? You're a Martian, and this is a war also against Mars."

His look darkened, but then again sardonic amusement struck him.

"We shall see what the Great Master says. There will be a few of our type humans, men and women, wanted when the worlds begin anew. The Great Master said so. He wants to study life on Earth as it was before the destruction."

Molo's glance swept behind us. I turned to see three figures approaching. My heart pounded. They were Anita, Venza and Molo's sister, Meka. They came slowly, trying to walk, with balancing outstretched arms. With a dozen curious Wandl workers crowding them, they came and joined Molo before us. My heart was pounding, but I flung them a curious, impersonal stare.

"You are here," said Molo. "Good. We go now." He bent over Snap and me. "I advise you make no effort to leap away, though it may look easy."

"Not me," said Snap. "Where would I go alone in this damned world? I can't very well leap back to Earth, can I?"

"True enough," said Molo. "You have sense, little fellow. But I just warn you: the guard who will watch you always is very sharp of eye. And the weapons here bring very swift death."

I could feel Anita's gaze upon me, but I did not dare look her way.

"Let's go," I said, "You will have no trouble with me."

With Molo leading us, and the giant insect-like guard following close behind, we made our slow, awkward way across the esplanade portals of the huge globular building.

And within, we traversed a cylinder-like, padded corridor and came presently upon the strangest interior scene I had ever beheld.

10

The room was so large that it seemed almost the entire interior of the building. It was a globular room, a hundred and fifty feet or more in diameter. The inner surface was crowded with people. It was a huge, hollow interior of a ball; and upon its concave surface a throng of the brown-shelled workers were gathered. They sat on low seats at the curved bottom of the room, where we entered, and up the sides and upon the slopes and the top, like flies in a globe, hanging head downward. There was no up or down here; the slight gravity made little difference.

I gazed up amazed to where, a hundred and fifty feet above me, head downward, the crowd of figures were calmly seated. These were clinging, of course; the pound-weight of each of them would drop them down if they let loose. But it required only a slight effort.

Between the tiers, there were narrow open aisles bearing glowlights at intervals. With Molo leading us, we stared up the curving incline of one of these aisles.

"Gregg! Good Lord, it's weird!" Snap said. "Where are we going to sit? Don't speak to the girls yet."

"Have you spoken to them?"

"Yes. A little, on the ship. They're watching for an opportunity but we have to be cautious. Gregg, I've got so much to tell you, but no chance. The brains can just about hear your thoughts."

We went only a short distance up the incline. There were vacant seats seemingly held ready for us. Our passage created a commotion among the figures. Some leaped up and over us to get a better look. I found that we were clinging to the mound-like convex surface of a small half-globe. It raised us some ten feet above the floor. There were low seats with arms against the side-pull of gravity. I found Anita close beside me. Her hand touched me, but she did not turn her head or speak.

Molo was on my other side. I chanced to see his feet. They were planted firmly on the floor. He wore wide-soled shoes equipped with suction pads, no doubt, which would enable him, like the Wandlites, to walk and stand upon the upper inner surfaces of buildings.

As during the moments when Snap and I stood on the landing esplanade, there was so much here that at first I could not encompass it. But now I began to grasp other details of the strange scene.

Poised in mid-air, almost exactly in the center of the huge globular room, was a metal globe of some thirty feet in diameter. It was held, not by any solid girders, but by four narrow beams of light which mounted to it from widespread points of the convex room.

Upon the entire surface of this thirty-foot globe, a group of masters were seated, in little, cup-like seats upon resilient stems. They swayed and nodded with movement. There seemed to be glowing wires and grids and thread-like beams of light carrying current. Light-threads shot from the mechanisms to the heads of the seated brains. All the devices were evidently in operation; and upon this poised central globe the attention of the audience was directed.

Molo bent over me. "The Great Intelligence soon will see you."

Snap, from the other side of Molo, whispered: "What are they doing up there?"

The faint hiss and throb of the devices were audible. I stared, trying to understand. Images, and sounds, invisible and inaudible were being received from across the millions of miles of space, and they were being transmuted within the brains themselves. I saw that discs were fastened upon the bulging foreheads of the brains, upon which the tiny light-beams carrying the vibrations impinged.

These brains, receiving "waves" of some unknown variety were, within the mechanism of the brain-cell, transmuting, translating the vibrations into things knowable. They were not seeing, not hearing, but knowing what went on millions of miles across space!

Again Molo bent over me. "They are about to show this audience what is hap-

pening on the three worlds."

Upon the thirty-foot globe I saw now a dozen or so balls of about three-foot diameter. These had been dark and I had not noticed them. Now they began glowing, not from wires carrying the current, but from the little hands of the brains touching them.

I stared at the brain nearest me. His flabby little arm was extended; his hand touched the image-ball; gave it light and color, like a fortune-teller of Earth with a crystal before her.

Even though I was some sixty feet from it, I could see the moving images clearly, and recognized the scene. The Tappan Interplanetary Stage. Ships were rising; two of our spaceships mounting.

And all in an instant the scene blurred, took form again. The red-green spires and minarets of Ferrok-Shahn. The Central Canal extended like a gash across the foreground; the "Mushroom Mountains" were in a line upon the horizon. Three Martian space-flyers slid up while we watched.

And now Grebhar. The silver forest in all its shining beauty, where Venza was born. The sunlight sparkled on the river. A spaceship was rising in the distant sky over the shining forest.

Beyond Anita, I heard Venza murmuring, "Home! If only we were there."

I could feel Anita move to silence her.

Molo was whispering: "They come. But we will be ready for them."

Another image: mid-space. The allied ships gathering, waiting for others to arrive. A group here of about ten of our ships from the three worlds: poised, waiting.

I was aware that upon the mound-like protuberance of the room-floor where we were sitting, a door was opening. It slid, or melted away. At our feet was an opening downward into the small interior of the mound.

Molo whispered, "The great Master. Sit quiet! He will talk to us."

Over us now a barrage came with a hiss, a circular curtain of insulation. The huge globular room faded. We were alone on the mound, Snap, Molo, myself, Anita, Venza and Meka upon the end of our bench. Behind us stood our single Wandlite guard, with a weapon in his shoulder hand.

At our feet an opening yawned into the mound-interior. It was a tiny, lighted room. In a cup-like seat a brain was perched, just below the level of our feet: the great Master Brain of Wandl. He was alone here. Not attended by retinue; no pomp and ceremony to usher us into his presence; no underlings obsequiously bowing to mark him for a great ruler.

We stared down, and the great brain stared up at us, seemingly equally curious. His head was a full four feet in diameter; the little body sat in the cup, with

dangling legs. The clothes were ornamented: there was a glowing device on the chest.

He spoke with a measured rumble, in Martian. "You are Molo, of Ferrok-Shahn."

"Yes," said Molo.

"You must say, 'Yes, Great Master.'"

"Yes, Great Master."

"I know about you. I know that we trust you."

The huge round eyes next fastened upon me. Then to Snap, and back to me. The words were English this time. "Men of Earth, are you decided, like the Martian, to join with us?"

I tried with sudden vehemence to still my thoughts, or to change them so that they lied. Fear surged upon me. Could this vast mechanism of human mind here at my feet interpret the vibrations of my thoughts? Could this Great Master of Wandl see into my mind?

The brain said, "You are uncertain. You do not want to die?"

"No Great Master," we both answered.

"You shall not, unless you attempt to cause us trouble. Your thoughts are black." He addressed Molo. "Have they ever been read?"

"No, Great Master."

"When opportunity comes, have them read." He added to Snap and me: "I plan to take prisoners. My Supreme Rulers, rulers of a neighboring more powerful planet, which sent Wandl upon her mission of conquest, ordered it. When your worlds are vacant of life, those who command me will want some of you left alive to be studied. Your thoughts are very black, Earthman. I think when they are carefully read you will prove no great advantage to us."

There was irony in the voice, and upon the monstrous bulging face came the horrible travesty of a grin.

The grin on the brain's face faded. His interest went again to Molo. "That is your sister." The eyes swung to Meka and back.

"Yes, Great Master."

"She is caring for this Earth-girl and this girl from Venus?"

"Yes, Great Master. I am fond of them. I have plans."

"They are in your charge, Martian; I will not interfere with you. But guard them well. I trust you and your sister. These others...."

"The Earth and the Venus girl can be of help to me, Great Master."

"How?"

"They knew young men who were in the Spaceship Service. They can tell me the armament of men and weapons on most of the spaceships which Earth will

send against us."

Did Molo really believe that? Probably not, but he wanted the girls with him. Again came that grotesque smile. "Let them not bother you, Martian. You have work to do. Listen carefully. There will be a battle. Earth, Mars, and Venus may perhaps have a hundred ships. I cannot bring destruction upon those three worlds in a day. We soon will make contact with the light-beam you placed on Earth. That I will show you. But the rotation cannot be stopped at once. It will take time.

"The enemy ships might dare to come to Wandl, but I shall not wait for that. All my spaceships are very nearly ready. If there is to be a battle, it shall be far from here, in the neighborhood of the enemy worlds. We are at this time about sixty-two million of your miles from the Earth, a third less than that from Mars, and about a third more from Venus. I understand, Martian, that you are skilled in space warfare."

The brain went on, "I have given you a vessel to command. You will be surprised to know its name: the Star-Streak."

Meka gasped, "But you destroyed it, Great Master!"

"Only wrecked it, Martian girl. It is repaired now. You, Molo—and your sister to help you—who could command it to more advantage? All your own weapons, and ours of Wandl have been added. You may select your crew. Is it to your liking?"

"Yes, Great Master."

"You will be housed in this city, Wor, in the dwelling-globe you occupied before. Keep your prisoners with you, if you like."

"These two Earthmen...." began Molo, but he was interrupted.

"Settle that later. I do not want the annoyance."

I was dimly conscious of a great clanging, coming through the curtain of barrage which was over us.

The brain added, "Keep Wyk with you, to guard the prisoners; he will also attend your needs. In the battle, Martian, I expect great things of you and your Star-Streak."

"Great Master, you will not be disappointed."

"And prisoners, but not too many. Bring me a few young specimens like these, representative of Venus, Mars and the Earth. I want both of the sexes, an equal number of each."

"Yes, Great Master."

"The warning signal is coming. You will now see our first contact."

The light at our feet was fading. It clung last by the gruesome face of the huge brain; the goggling eyes shone green, and as the light in the little mound-room dimmed there was in a moment nothing left but those lurid green pools of the

brain's eyes.

Then I was aware that the aperture at our feet had closed. Over us, the barrage curtain was dissipating, sight and sound coming in to us. The huge ball-shaped conclave room again became visible, the audience crowding its entire inner surface.

I suddenly felt Anita's fingers twitching at my sleeve.

"Gregg, darling, can you hear me?"

"Yes. Be careful."

But Molo was gazing up over our heads. The crowd was shifting, bending so that they all seemed gazing at their feet. A dim white radiance, seeming to come from down here somewhere near us, lay in a splotch on a segment of the throng overhead. Molo was watching.

I whispered, "All right, Anita. Quick, what is it?"

"The great control station is not far from here. Venza and I have been trying to find out where it is exactly."

She stopped, evidently fearful of Meka. Then she added:

"Gregg, we haven't been guarded very closely; they're not suspicious of us."

"Later, Anita. Can't talk now."

"No. Watch our chance. Later."

I turned toward Molo. "What's that up there?"

"The transparent ray is opening the top of the globe."

The clanging signal gong had stilled. The audience was hushed and expectant. The white patch of light overhead spread until it encompassed all the top of the globe. The whole area was glowing. The people were white, spectral shapes, transparent! And the top of the globe was transparent; I saw the night sky, with the gleaming reddish stars.

It was, in a moment, as though we were staring up at a huge square window orifice cut in the top of the room. A broad vista of cloudless sky and stars was visible. Across it, like a shining sword, was a narrow, opalescent beam.

"The Earth-beam which I planted," Molo whispered triumphantly. "Our control station will contact with it now. The first contact!"

Earth was below our angle of vision, but the beam from Greater New York, sweeping the sky with the Earth's rotation, was passing now comparatively close to Wandl.

There was an expectant moment. Then into the sky leaped another ray, narrow, luridly green. It swung up from Wandl and darted into space. The hissing, agonized electrical scream from it as it burst through the Wandl atmosphere was deafening. I saw it strike the Earth-beam, grip it with a blinding burst of radiance up there in the sky, clinging, pulling against the rotation of the Earth with a lever

sixty million miles long.

A moment of screaming sound in the atmosphere around us, and that conflict of light in the sky. Then the screaming suddenly stilled. The Wandl beam vanished.

The Earth-beam still swept the heavens like a stiff, upstanding sword. But in that moment when Wandl gripped it, the axis of the Earth had been changed a little. The rotation was slowed. By a few minutes, the day and the night on Earth were lengthened.

It was the beginning of Earth's desolation.

11

"But when do we eat?" Snap demanded.

"Soon," said Molo.

"I hope so."

We were leaving the great room as we had come. Walking? I can only call it that, though the word is futile to describe our progress as we made our way to the lighted esplanade, across its side and into what might have been called a street. Globular houses, single, or one set upon another, or half a dozen swaying on a stick, gardens of vegetables and flowers. I saw what seemed to be a round patch of hundred-foot tree-stalks, like a thick batch of bamboo. It was laced and latticed thick with vines.

"A house," Snap murmured. "That's a house."

Another type of dwelling. This patch of vegetable growth, so flimsy it was all stirring with the movement of the night breeze, was woven into circular thatched rooms, birds' nests of little dwellings. Staring up, I seemed to see a hundred of them. Rope-vine ladders; flimsy vine platforms; tiny lights winking up there in the trees.

On a platform twenty feet above us a group of tiny infant brains sat in a gruesome row, goggling down on us.

We passed the tree patch; again the city seemed all a thin, flexible metal. The ground was like a smooth rock surface, alternating with small patches of soil where things were growing.

We walked in a slow, unsteady line. Molo led. Behind Snap and me came the girls, ignoring us; and at the rear, the brown-shelled giant guard stalked after us.

Molo stopped at a large globe-dwelling. "We rest here. I will go see that our rooms are ready." He gestured to his sister. "Meka, you come with me. Wyk will guard them."

We stood at an oval doorway. A worker came out, stared at us, then went back. On an upper balcony, a brain was gazing down at us.

I caught Molo's brawny arm. "Won't you tell us what's going on?"

"Rest here with Wyk."

"What are you going to do?" asked Snap.

"I am going to select my men for battle."

"When do you go?"

"In a few hours, Earth-time."

"And you're taking us on the ship, Molo? Where is your Star-Streak?"

"That I must find out." He, gazed at us with a slow, faint smile. "Not far. Nothing is far on Wandl. I do not know if I will take you on my ship. You might be of help, or you might be troublesome. The Great Master wants prisoners, or I would have killed you long ago."

He took his sister and left us. There was a brief moment when Wyk, standing aside incuriously, gave us opportunity for swift whispers.

Again Anita clutched me. "Gregg, we'll be separated now. But with Molo gone, Venza and I can get away from Meka."

Venza whirled on us. "Gregg, listen! Snap, be quiet! If we're ever going to escape, now is the time. You get away from Wyk. We'll handle Meka."

"And do what?" Snap demanded.

"The control station! We'll find it!"

Anita whispered, "We've got to wreck it, Gregg. Stop those contacts. It'll mean the end of Earth if we don't."

I protested. "Better try for Molo's vessel. We might be able to navigate it, escape from this world."

"The control station first," Anita insisted. "Gregg, we know something about it. You and Snap, with your strength, can demolish it. And then, if we can locate the Star-Streak...."

It was a desperate, mad plan, but there seemed nothing better. The girls insisted now that though they did not know where the control station was located, they knew the details of its interior; its physical layout; its human operators.

"In an hour," whispered Snap. "Have you got a timer? Is it going?"

The little timers we still had with us were undoubtedly operating differently from on Earth; but they were in agreement.

"An hour by our timers," I whispered. "We'll make the break then, try to find you inside. Anita, if you get free of Meka, don't come out."

"All right."

We had only a moment to try and plan it. "Anita, in an hour, with Molo gone...."

He came suddenly with a driving leap from the doorway and dropped among us. "All is ready. Come."

We ignored the girls. Snap again protested that he was hungry, which indeed,

for me at least, was certainly the truth. And I was parched with thirst. I felt that this vaunted strength of my Earth body would not last long without food and drink.

We entered the globular interior. There were narrow corridors; triangular rooms; a slatted, ladder-like incline leading upward to a higher level.

The girls followed Meka up the incline. Molo and Wyk herded us into a nearby room. "You will have your food and drink here. Cause Wyk no trouble and you will be quite safe."

He turned, but Snap plucked at him. "When are you coming back?"

"Not too long."

I said, "We will cause you no trouble. Take us on the ship."

"I will see."

He murmured to Wyk in Martian, then left us.

* * * * *

The small triangular room had no windows and only the single door. Wyk touched a mechanism and it slid closed. The place was a queer apartment indeed. The floor was convex, curving upward to the walls. The light radiance dimly glowed, as though inherent to the metal ceiling. There was strange metal furniture: a table and chairs, high and large; bunks of a size evidently for the ten-foot workers.

The door opened, and a worker brought us food and drink. Wyk sat apart and watched us while we consumed the meal. I noticed that he seldom let himself get close to us. He sat stiffly upright, with his jointed legs bent double under him, his many arms and pincers hanging inert, save the one short shoulder-arm with flexible fingers gripping his weapon. At his waist, and upon several hook-like protuberances of his chest, other weapons and devices were hanging.

Snap gazed up from where, on the floor, we were ravenously eating and drinking. "Aren't you hungry?" he asked Wyk.

"No."

"You eat often?"

"No."

An incurious, taciturn creature, this insect-like being. Snap whispered, "Got to talk to him; make him let us get close. That weapon...."

How the weapon operated, we did not know; but that a flash from it would bring instant death we well imagined.

Half of that hour of waiting was past.

I said to Wyk, "You would call this night on your world; the sun obviously is on the other hemisphere. When will it be day?"

His gaze swung on me. His hollow voice, deep from the capacious shell of

chest, echoed and blurred in the room.

"I think Wandl has no rotation now. Or almost none."

He was not as taciturn, as he had seemed, and presently we had him talking. We learned several things regarding the gravity-controls of Wandl, by which at will the planet could be rotated on its axis; and by which also it could navigate space. We learned that the great control station contained these gravitational mechanisms, as well as the mechanism by which the Earth had been attacked. But we could not discover where on Wandl that station was located.

Then, with our meal finished, Snap rose to his feet. "Those arms of yours, seem very strange to us. But they must be mighty useful."

Snap had taken a cautious, shoving step. It wafted him directly toward the guard.

The weird, brown-scaled face of Wyk, with its popping eyes upon stems and its upended mouth, contorted with surprise.

"Back! Don't come near me!"

He flung himself back, but struck the wall of the room. All his arms were writhing. Alarm was in his voice. It was the first time either Snap or I had made an unexpected move, and it startled Wyk.

"Wait! Let me go!" Snap cried.

Wyk's longest arms were around Snap, like the tentacles of an octopus, and Snap was struggling, fighting. We had not intended this at this time, but the opportunity was here.

I scrambled from the floor. Now, with the need for powerful action, the lack of gravity was a tremendous handicap. I went up with flailing arms into the air. Wyk fired his weapon, but it missed me, a soundless, dimly-white bolt. It hissed along the curving wall of the room. The smell of it was a stench in my nostrils.

I hit the concave ceiling, shoved down, and like a swimmer in water struck against the struggling bodies of Snap and the guard. The waving little shoulder arm with the weapon came at me.

Snap shouted, "Gregg, look out!"

I seized the little arm; it felt like the shell of a huge crab. For a moment we were all three entangled, floundering, unable to find a foothold. Then suddenly I felt Snap pulling me loose.

"We've got him!"

The brown-shelled body of Wyk sank away from us, hit the floor and lay still. I felt the floor under me, and Snap clutching at me.

In my hand I was clutching Wyk's little shoulder arm, with fingers still gripping the weapon. I had jerked it out of his shoulder socket. With a shudder I cast the noisome thing away. Whether Wyk was dead or not we did not know. He lay

on his back; the hideous face stared upward.

"I cracked the shell," Snap gasped. "We've got to get out of here. Better try and get the girls loose now."

We wasted no further time on Wyk. Snap snatched several of his weapons and mechanical devices. We stowed them hastily in our pockets. One was like another to us; we could only guess at their uses.

"His shoes, Gregg. I can't get the damn things off him."

"Here are shoes."

A small pile of shoes was in a corner of the room; wide, resilient suction soles, built like sandals. They were very large, but the things were so placed that it seemed we could fasten them to our boots.

"But not now, Snap."

We snatched up four pairs of the shoes.

There seemed nothing else to do. Could we get the door open? Snap was already fumbling at it. "Accursed thing! It won't give."

Then it slid open. The dim corridor was visible. No one, nothing, out there. "Come on, Gregg! In a rush!"

We went like bouncing rubber figures up the incline ladder.

"Snap, watch out!" He all but cracked his head with an upward leap. Every instant we expected to be set upon. There was a terraced upper hall, black with shadow; dark ovals of doorways led into rooms.

No one here. As yet we were not discovered.

We stood at the intersection of two corridors. One went almost vertically up, like a chimney extending into the dome peak of the globe. Its sides were latticed; we could go up it hand over hand, like monkeys. The other sloped at an angle downward.

"Which way?" Snap whispered. "What do you think? Got to find them."

It still lacked about five minutes of our designated time, but it would not do to burst in upon the girls, perhaps to find Molo and guards there.

"Let's wait a minute, listen, see if we can't get some idea."

We were backed against the corridor wall, almost in darkness. From the dark length of the descending corridor came a thump, the sound of a struggle, and then a muffled scream. Venza! And we heard her words: "Anita! Look out for her! She's got a knife!"

As though diving into water, Snap and I plunged head first into the blackness of the corridor.

12

Later, we learned that Anita and Venza had tried much the same tactics on Meka that we had used on Wyk, but their task was more difficult. She was suspicious of them. Venza asked her where the control station was, but she wouldn't answer.

"Your brother said it was just beyond the dark forest," Anita said. "What is the dark forest?"

"A place with trees where no one lives."

"Off that way." Venza gestured. "That's what Molo said. Will it be day soon, or will the night keep on?"

"If they cause Wandl to rotate, it will soon be day." An ironic look crossed Meka's face. "I am in no mood for answering more of your silly questions. Save the breath."

"Well, if that's they way you feel about it," replied Venza laughing, "we will. There's not much air in here." She shoved herself across the floor toward the closed window.

"Get back!"

"Oh, all right—all right!"

Perhaps Meka herself felt there was not enough air. She stood waveringly upright, and pushed herself with a slow leap for the window. Her back for that moment was to Anita and Venza. They shoved from the floor, whirled through the air and were upon her.

It was a brief struggle, and instantly they knew that they had lost. The huge Martian whirled and flung them off. Her upflung fist, with a blow like a man's, caught Anita's thigh and knocked her toward the ceiling. She sank in a heap on the floor, saw that Venza had shoved back, but was standing upright.

Anita bent double, with her feet braced against a chair, tensed to shove forward again. At the still unopened window, Meka crouched. Anita heard Venza's warning outcry. "Anita, look out for her! She's got a knife!"

Upon this scene, in a moment, Snap and I came with a rush. The closed door was not barred. We slid it down and catapulted through the opening. Meka sailed over us. I swam up at her; seized her. The knife ripped my blouse and slit the flesh of my upper arm with a glancing blow. Then Snap came and struck against us; we sank to the floor.

Meka had fought silently, but now she was shouting. I twisted her wrist, seized the knife handle and flung the knife away. I was aware of Anita lunging to retrieve it. And over us Venza appeared, waving a metal chair as though it were a huge feather.

Snap gasped, "Gregg get your hand over her mouth. Shut her up!"

We had her subdued in a moment, but it seemed almost too late. Outside the opened door a distant shout sounded.

I shoved Meka toward the door. "If you don't do what I say, I'll kill you," I whispered into her ear.

"What shall I do?"

There came another shout, closer, now. Someone was coming.

"Call out in Martian. Say there's no trouble, nothing wrong. You were arguing with these girls."

She did as I commanded. The voice down the corridor answered, and then subsided.

Snap slid the door closed. "Hurry! We'll go by the window. I dropped those damn shoes."

Anita and Venza tore their dark coats into strips. We bound and gagged Meka, laid her in a corner of the room. We had dropped the shoes as we came plunging through the door oval. We found that we could all fasten their things to our feet. I put Meka's knife in my belt.

"Hurry, all of you!" Snap was saying. "Got to get out of here; jump by the window."

"Say, look at these wing-shields!" From a recess in a corner of the room Venza appeared with an armful of the small shields. We thrust our hands and forearms into their loops. The shields extended from a few inches beyond our fingers to the elbow.

Snap had slid the window blind. I bent over the prone form of Meka. "Don't try to move. Molo will release you when he comes back."

We gathered on the starlit balcony. The city stretched around us. There was as yet no alarm. No swimming figures near here; but a distance away we saw the towering conclave globe, with its audience just beginning to emerge, like bees coming from a hive.

"Let me go first." I held Anita and Venza at the rail. "It's like swimming. I suppose we'll get the way of it pretty quickly."

I balanced on the rail, and then leaped off. With the others after me, we swam awkwardly upward into the reddish starlight.

The city structures dropped away, showing in a dark blur with winking lights. Over us were the stars and the cloudless night sky. Behind, the flashing light beams of radiance at the landing stage, the figures fluttering, the great globe, all dropped swiftly beneath a sharply curving horizon.

We had passed the city. A thousand feet below us, a dark forest stretched. It was beyond this that the control station was located.

The swimming flight became less awkward, but it was an effort in this abnor-

mal Wandl air. Snap and Venza were behind me. Anita was leading, a strange, bird-like little figure. White blouse; long parted dark skirt from which her gray-sheathed legs kicked out as she swam, sometimes half upon one side, or with a breast stroke. The braids of her dark hair fell forward over her shoulders.

She was tiring: I could not miss it. How far had we gone? Ten miles, perhaps. There was only a small vista of this little world visible at once, it was so sharply convex. A line of distant mountains was to our left. We had crossed a river at the forest edge.

I suppose we had been half an hour swimming those ten-miles. Was daylight coming? It seemed that the sideline of mountain-tops had a little light on them. The opalescent beam from Earth had swept this portion of the sky and was gone below the horizon.

Apparently there was no pursuit from the city. Behind me, Venza panted, "Say, I'm about finished. Can't we rest?"

With this altitude we could cease our efforts and drift down. It would take several minutes.

We gathered together, falling with a slow drift toward the dark forest under us. The trees seemed huge and spindly, a porous growth something on the Martian style, with huge leaves and a tangle of matter vines. They came mounting up at us as we fell with slowly gathering speed.

"Shall we go on?" I suggested.

"Yes." But she was tired, and Anita as well.

"Girls," I asked, "where is the Star-Streak?"

They did not know.

Anita said, "Perhaps we can land in the trees, and examine what devices we have here."

The girls had carefully watched Molo upon several occasions. They thought we might find we had a hand-globe or a couple of the repulsive rays. With these we could attain rapid flight without effort.

We sank, fluttering, into a dark and tangled mass of the forest tree-top growth. I had understood that Wandl was crowded with its human population, yet this dark and silent forest evidently was uninhabited. We clung, like awkward birds, to a swaying limb of a tree-top. The trees were close together.

"Let's see what you've got," Venza demanded.

We handed the girls the various devices we had taken from Wyk. Most of them were the size of my fist: globular metallic projectors like hand bombs; ray cylinders; a device with multiple barrels the size of one's finger, set in a small circumference of a circular grid of wires.

Anita said, "I saw Molo with one of these. He killed an unwilling worker on the

ship."

"I'll take a look around," Snap said anxiously. "Suppose we're being followed? Give me that weapon."

There was vegetation partly over us, so that the sky was half obscured. Snap took the weapon, and like a monkey swaying precariously, he ran and leaped among the upper branches, crashing his way until he could see back toward the horizon beyond which lay the city of Wor.

We heard his voice. "All clear. Nothing in sight. You coming up? Better get started."

I put the weapons in my pocket. Snap had one now in the branches over us. I was examining an electronic bolt, when suddenly there came Snap's call. "Gregg! Look out!"

We heard the hiss and saw the flash of his bolt.

Anita swung at me. "Gregg, see there!"

I followed her gesture, and then I knew why this forest was shunned by humans!

13

The forest swarmed with living things. Here in the dark they had been crawling upon us. Every branch of this leafy tree-top angle had something staring at us; the darkness was suddenly glowing with a myriad little green torches which were their eyes. They all winked on in an instant, as though at a signal, or at the sound of Snap's shout and the hiss of his bolt.

Insects? I suppose I should call them that. With a glance I saw that they were of many sizes and shapes; tiny little things with eyes like lanterns; things of many legs, finger-length, hand-length, and some as long as my forearm. Brown-shelled things, with eyes glowing on stems. There was one quite near us, a smooth, brown-shelled body; a round head on top, as big as my fist. And these things had heads like little distended brains.

What horrible jest of nature this was, with miniatures of the Wandl workers, crawling here, unable to stand erect, groping with little pincers. And miniature brains with naked, shriveled bodies.

It seemed that the eyes of that little brain were fixed on me with a baleful green glare in the darkness. Anita and Venza were floundering to their feet in horror. They all but slipped from the limb. The weapons and devices they had arranged there slid off and went down into the darkness unheeded. From above us came Snap's horrified shouts and the hiss of his bolts.

"Here!" I gasped. "My hand—Anita, Venza, jump!"

I shoved Anita upward. The little eyes suddenly were all in movement, advancing upon us. Anita floundered, fluttered, got into the air and mounted toward

Snap. Again Venza slipped off the limb. I lunged and drew her up. Green eyes nearest us came swooping. I did not dare fire a bolt; it was too close to Venza. I flung the entire weapon at the green eyes, but I missed.

The little thing bit Venza's arm. She screamed and her flailing hand hit the tiny distended head. Its hideous little scream mingled with hers. It floated downward, massed and purple-red with gushing blood.

I struggled upward with the inert form of Venza under one arm. Anita was mounting, free. Snap came lunging down.

"Fired every bolt in the damn weapon!" He saw the unconscious Venza. "Good God, Gregg!"

Never have I heard such anguish in his tone. "Gregg, she isn't...."

"One of them bit her. Help me."

He floundered up with her, a hundred feet above the tree-tops of that horrible forest. The little lanterns of eyes down there had all winked out. The open star-light was over us.

Anita came swimming, then Venza stirred. She murmured, "... all right."

She had fainted. It seemed nothing more; but I found her upper arm swelling. She tried to bend her body and sit up; but it threw us all out of balance.

"Lie straight," Snap murmured. "Venza, are you all right?"

"Yes. Why not?" And then she laughed. It sent a shuddering chill over me. "What's the fuss about? Let's get away from here. Somebody will be coming."

She was swimming now and we let her loose, but stayed close by her. The reddish firmament was like an inverted bowl. The curving Wandl surface gave us a narrow little vista, the forest rolling up from the horizon in front. Then we saw where the forest seemed to end. Water was beyond it: a ribbon like a broad river, and beyond that, frowning mountains, terraced and spired with jagged peaks.

Snap and I suddenly recalled the gravity ray projectors. We tried them; found that they would fling little beams of two varieties. Pencil points of radiance, they seemed to have an effective range of no more than a few hundred feet.

I let myself drift downward, experimenting. The tiny beam struck the forest-top. I felt the projector pulling violently downward in my hand. I clung to it. I was being drawn swiftly down by the attractive gravity force of the ray. The forest rose rapidly under me: I was all but flung upon it before I could find the other controls.

Then the ray altered its nature; the projector in my hand pulled me steadily up. But after a few hundred feet, I felt I was mounting only of my own momentum, with gravity and air-friction retarding me.

Snap had tried similar experiments. We rejoined the swimming girls. I stared into Venza's face; it was pale but she did not seem distressed. She winked at me.

"How's your arm, Venza?"

"It hurts, but I guess it's all right."

I turned to Snap. "I guess we can work these things. Get Venza to cling to you."

Our progress now was far less difficult. Venza clung to Snap's ankles and Anita to mine. With the repulsing rays directed downward, we had a strong upward and forward thrust. We went forward with great thousand-foot bounds. The forest rolled back under us. We came over the gleaming river. It seemed several miles broad. It appeared to have a swift current.

I saw sunlight upon the mountain ahead. The darkness had been paling. Now day suddenly burst upon us. The sun, smaller than on Earth, mounted swiftly up. It was a flattened, distorted, dull-red disc, blurred by Wandl's strange atmosphere. We were in a dim red daylight.

Anita twitched at my ankles. "Look back of us!"

We were going up. Venza and Snap, behind us, were in a descending arc. Above them, far back in the direction from which they had come, two blobs were visible up against the reddish day sky.

Pursuit? It seemed so. The blobs went down, but came up again, traveling with rays, like ourselves.

I called to Snap, "Someone after us! Two figures back there!"

He was shouting, "Gregg! Gregg, help!"

My gaze had been on the distant figures. I saw now that at the bottom of his arc, and starting upward again, Snap had lost Venza. The impulse of his ray had twitched his ankle from her grasp. Or had she let loose? He was about a hundred feet above the river, and Venza, with acceleration downward unchecked, was falling into it.

"Gregg, help! Venza, swim up!" His frenzied call reached me as I used the attractive ray and Anita and I whirled over and lunged downward.

"Gregg, help! Venza use your arms! Swim!"

She was lying inert, making no effort to keep from falling. Her body turned slowly, end-over-end. She struck the swiftly-flowing river surface but did not sink; instead, she half emerged, came up and lay in a crumpled heap; and with its rapid current, the river carried her away.

It was several minutes before we could reach Venza. Snap was already there, floundering on the water, awkwardly maintaining his balance, bending over Venza. "Gregg, she's unconscious. Fainted again."

The bite of that insect! The thought of it turned me cold.

The river surface was like a very soft rubber mattress. The water clung to us, wet us. We could not kneel or stand erect; but in sitting down only a few inches of our bodies were submerged. We floated like corks, we were so light, and so little

water did we displace.

We struggled with Venza across the gluey river surface. She had fallen near the further shore. Rocks, crags and strewn boulders were passing as the current swept us along at a speed of about ten miles an hour. She lay in our arms, eyes closed, her face pallid but calm. She seemed to breathe rapidly; but that on Wandl was normal.

We landed on the rocky shore. It was still daylight. The blurred sun was winging across the zenith so swiftly that its movement was visible. Wandl had been suddenly endowed with axial rotation. Even in these few minutes, the day was past its noon. On the distant mountain peaks looming above the nearby horizon; it seemed that the sheen of coming night was mingled with the red sunlight.

Anita and Snap laid Venza on the rocks. I suddenly remembered the two blobs in the sky behind us, which had seemed to be following. I stood gazing across the river. The red sky there seemed empty.

"Thank God, she's reviving!" Snap called at me and I joined them. Venza was stirring. Color was coming into her cheeks. Her lips were murmuring as though she were talking in her sleep.

Then she opened her eyes. Her gaze fixed on us as we bent over her. "Why, what's the matter? Where are we? I thought we were in the tree-tops. Snap, don't look at me like that, dear. I'm all right—only confused."

She could remember nothing since that gruesome thing bit into her arm, but the attack of its poison in her veins seemed definitely over. We sat with her, soothing her, explaining what had happened. And she was wholly rational. Her strength came back; her mind cleared.

The brief red day came to its close. The sun plunged below the horizon; the stars winked into being. The red-purple Wandl night again was here. And now we saw that the whole firmament was swinging, the rotation made visible.

The darkness leaped around us. Shadows filled the rock hollows. The caves and recesses of this rocky shore turned black with darkness. And in the sky now we saw another of those familiar opalescent beams. This was the one from Mars: we could identify the red disc of the planet.

And then, from the mountains ahead of us but still below our horizon, the Wandl control station shot its attacking beam upward. Again there was that conflict in the sky. The axis of Mars was being altered, its rotation slowed.

We could see now that we were much nearer than before to the control station. It seemed only about twenty miles ahead of us. The scream from it was deafening.

The Wandl beam died presently. The electrical scream from the control station was stilled.

The Earth's axis had been altered. Now Mars; and next would be Venus. A few more of these gravitational attacks and then the helpless planets, with rotation checked, would be towed away by Wandl, out into the deadly cold of interstellar space.

Anita abruptly gave a startled outcry. The four of us, sitting in a group, had no time to rise. From behind a dark crag nearby, two figures appeared. The starlight showed them clearly.

Molo and Wyk! They lunged forward at us.

14

We were unarmed. I had flung my weapon at the thing in the forest; and Snap had exhausted all his bolts firing at the multitude of green eyes. Molo and Wyk came with a dive through the air. Two tiny flashes leaped from them to the rocks behind them, and flung them forward.

Snap and I seized Venza and Anita. It was a second of confusion; then I saw we would not be able to rise in time. The driving, oncoming figures were no more than twenty feet away.

"Protect Venza, Snap! Get her behind you!"

Snap shoved Venza behind him; I got myself in front of Anita. We had almost gained our feet. I tried to thrust Anita and myself violently upward. We rose, but only a few feet. And then we were struck by the oncoming body of Wyk, like a huge, light-shelled, three-pound insect lunging in mid-air against us. The two longest tentacle arms wrapped around us. Anita twisted and kicked. The gruesome, goggling face of Wyk thrust itself almost into mine. The hollow voice panted, "I have you fast."

One of my arms was free and I struck with my fist at the gaping, upended mouth. There was a crack. My fist sank through the shell; a cold, sticky ooze spurted out.

Wyk screamed. His encircling arms fell away. The grisly smashed face was white with ooze and pulp where my fist had gone in.

We had sunk back to the rocks. I kicked the dead body of Wyk away.

"Anita! Swim up!"

"No!"

Sinking beside us were the flailing bodies of Molo, Snap and Venza were drifting down. They seemed intermingled. Snap was shouting: "No you don't! Drop that!"

I leaped for them. Something long and thin and glowing was dangling from Molo's hand. He broke loose from the struggling Snap and Venza; his feet struck the rocks and he shoved himself backward. My leap had carried me too high. I saw that in his hand was a six-foot length of glowing wire. He whirled it. The weight

on its end described an arc, and then he flung the handle. The weighted wire struck Venza and Snap just as their repulsive ray shot down against the rocks and shoved them upward. The whirling wire wrapped itself around them, bound them together. Its glow vanished. Snap had been shouting, "Gregg, come up." But it died in his throat.

All this while, in those few seconds, I was vaulting over Molo, trying to get back to the ground to leap again. I saw that Anita was crawling on the rocks. My gravity cylinder was at my belt. I had jammed it there to leave my hands free just as Wyk struck me.

I saw that Snap and Venza, wrapped together by the wire, had dropped their gravity projector. Their entwined figures went up some fifty feet and stopped; then began drifting down.

Molo was shouting, "You, Gregg Haljan! Now for you!"

I struck the rocks and fell twenty feet beyond him. I jerked out my gravity projector, but I did not know what I wanted to do with it. And in that second I saw that the standing Molo was aiming at me. Directly over my head the inert bound bodies of Venza and Snap were falling.

A flash leaped over the dark rocks from Molo. There was a split-second when I thought it was the end of me. But I was still alive. The bodies of Venza and Snap struck my head and shoulders; knocked me down. I felt Molo's ray upon me. Not death, but only his gravity ray, like a giant hand pulling me. Apparently he wanted us alive. I was scrambling on the rocks, entangled with Venza and Snap. Molo's radiance clung. All three of us went tumbling forward toward him. I flashed my own ray, but I was rolling end over end, and it went wild.

I dropped it, saw Molo's beam vanish, saw his upright standing figure towering above me. Snap, Venza and I were in a heap at his feet. He leaned down and seized me. "Now, Gregg Haljan, I will teach you not to try escaping like this!"

With the huge, muscular Martian gripping me, his fist striking for my face but missing and hitting my shoulder, this was a semblance of normality. I could understand fighting like this. I wrapped my legs around him; my fingers reached for his brawny throat as he kicked us into the air free of the entangling bodies of Snap and Venza.

We rose a few feet and sank back, gripping each other, lunging and striking. He was very powerful, this Martian. I caught the round pillar of his throat with my hands. For an instant I shut off his wind, but I could not hold the grip. He struck me a glancing blow in the face, then the heel of his hand was under my chin. It forced back my head, broke my hold on his throat. With returning breath, he gasped an inhalation. And I heard his exulting words: "You are not strong enough!"

We rolled and bumped over the rocks. I caught a blow from his fists full in my face. It was almost the end; I felt my strength going. He laughed as he struck away

my answering swing. I was on my back against the rocks, with his body on top of me. Then beyond and behind his hulking shoulder, silhouetted against the sky, I saw Anita rise up. She was lifting a jagged gray mass of stone, full four feet in diameter. She poised it, then crashed it down on Molo's head. He sank away from me; his arms relaxed. The boulder rolled beside him.

It was over now. Wyk was dead; his gruesome body with its smashed face lay near us. Molo was unconscious, breathing heavily, lying motionless, with a wound on the back of his head, the blood welling out, matting his hair.

Anita and I were uninjured, victorious—but what a hollow victory. On the rocks here, bound together by that strange wire, Snap and Venza lay inert. We bent over them. The wire was cold to the touch now. It resisted our efforts to untwine it. We pulled frantically as we pleaded: "Snap, speak to us! Venza, can't you speak?"

Their eyes were open. I was aware that there was no starlight above us, but instead, a lurid sky of flying clouds, shot with a greenish cast. The darkness here was green. The glow of it struck upon the wide-open staring eyes of Venza and Snap. It seemed that there was intelligence in those eyes.

"Snap, can't you hear us?"

His eyelids came down and up again, slowly, as though by a horrible effort. "Can you move, Snap?"

His right eyelid moved. Was his answer, no?

Anita and I had never felt so horrible a sense of aloneness as that which swept us in those succeeding minutes. A breeze was springing up in the lurid green night. It came from the mountains. It wafted across the nearby river, rippling the surface which was now green and sullen. We did not know where to go, what to do.

We found at last that we could untwist the stiffly clinging wire. We laid Venza and Snap on the rocks side-by-side, about thirty feet back from the river. The glowing wire had burned their clothes only a little, as the current was absorbed by the contact with their bodies.

"Snap, are you in pain?"

His eyes seemed to be trying to talk to me. Anita rose from Venza: "Oh, Gregg, what shall we do? Can't we carry them?"

But where? To what purpose? Wild thoughts thronged me: Wandl's control station, bringing chaos and death upon Earth. Mars and Venus. What was that now to me? I thought of Molo's ship.

"Anita, if we can get to the Star-Streak, seize it and escape from this world...."

"Carry Snap and Venza there now? But we don't know where it is. Can we make Molo lead us?"

But Molo lay unconscious. I could not rouse him.

Anita and I were so alone! We clung together.

"Gregg, look at that sky!"

The mounting wind was tugging at us. It whined through the dark mountain defiles, surged out over the river where the water now was beginning to toss with waves crossing the swift current. The sky was shot with green shafts of radiance. Over us, the lowering, leaden clouds were scudding, riding the wind.

It burst now upon us; I found suddenly that Anita and I were bracing against it. A puff dislodged us, so that we were blown a dozen feet, bringing up against a crag, as though we were balloons.

"Anita—this wind—we can't maintain ourselves here. We...."

Horror checked me at the thought of Venza and Snap, lying there on the rocks. We saw the body of Wyk, like a great dried insect, lifted by the wind, whirled like a brown leaf over and over, and carried away.

A little pebble came hurtling and struck me. Then a rain of pebbles, like hailstones was pelting at us.

The storm was probably caused by the axial rotation of Wandl. The light-beam upon Earth had been attacked by the Wandl control station without axial rotation. But to attack the beam from Mars, a manipulation of Wandl was necessary. The planet's rotation was started; and suddenly checked. It remained night now, here in this hemisphere. Perhaps there were natural storm tendencies here; perhaps the operators of the control station were unduly eager, manipulating the rotation too suddenly.

At all events, it was frightening. I shouted above its whine and the clatter of the pebbles: "Hold onto me! We'll get to Venza and Snap."

We reached the two inert forms, where they had blown into a niche between two boulders. "Can't stay here, Anita."

"No! If it begins again!"

"Over there! A cave!"

We got Venza and Snap into it, just as another gust came, with a rain of dirt and loose stones pelting past outside.

Suddenly I thought of Molo. "Anita, stay here! Must get to Molo."

"Gregg, no!"

"I must. If we can bring him to consciousness, make him tell us where the Star-Streak is...."

I flung off her restraining hold. The wind had eased up. I leaped out into it, swimming. The rocks slid by close under me in a swift sidewise drift. In a moment I would be carried out over the river. It was a chaos of green, windswept darkness. But there was bursting light now overhead and rumbling claps, like thunder.

I saw Molo's body where the wind held him pinned against the side of a flat, ten-foot rock butte, and dove for him, swimming down frantically until I struck against the rock with a blow that almost knocked the breath from me. Molo was still obviously unconscious.

How long it took me to get back to Anita, floundering with Molo's body, I do not know. I managed to keep against the ground; was blown back, and struggled forward again. The wind came with strange puffs. In one of the lulls, I hauled Molo through the air and into the cave.

"Gregg!" Anita held to me, her arms around me. "Gregg dear, you were gone so long!"

I was battered and bruised and breathless. The cave's mouth was like a ten-foot tunnel leading downward into blackness.

"Gregg, I put Venza and Snap here."

They lay side by side, like two dead bodies, here in the greenish darkness. We placed Molo with them. Together Anita and I crouched beside them, clinging to each other, listening to the wild sweep of the wind outside. The storm had burst into full fury now. It would whirl us away like feathers, outside there now. The lightning and thunder hissed and crashed. Stones and boulders were being flung like hailstones.

This flimsy, weightless world! It seemed as though the rocks here on which we were crouching would be shifted and carried away.

"Gregg! Gregg, is this the end?"

A mass of rocks fell at the opening, closing it, so that we were buried here in the darkness. "Anita, my darling, I will never stop loving you."

Darkness, with her arms around me and a shuddering world outside. But here, only Anita and her soft arms.

"Gregg!"

Horror was in her voice. Then I saw what she was seeing. It was not just Anita and I buried here in the darkness with the bodies of Snap and Venza and Molo. Something else was here.

From the blackness of the cave, two green, glowing eyes were staring. Their radiance showed me the outlines of a distended head. An insane thing? But it was not another of the forest insects. This seemed to be an animal. The glow of its distended head disclosed a lythe, horizontal body, seemingly solid and muscled. A chattering, insane animal, here in the dark with us! We heard mouthing, mumbling words, and an eerie, cackling laugh as it came padding toward us.

The thing in the cave stared at us as we clung together in the darkness, transfixed for a moment by horror. The distended head, ghastly of face with its green glowing eyes, wobbled upon a long, spindly neck. The eyes seemed luminous of

their own internal light. The radiance from them faintly lighted the black cave so we were able to see its tawny, hairy body. It was long sleek, the size of an Earth leopard. A muscled body, with ponderable weight, it was moving toward us, padding on the rocks.

I recovered my wits and shoved Anita behind me. I crouched on one knee. There was no escape, nowhere to run. This tunnel was blocked by a fallen rock mass behind us, with the wild storm raging outside. The thing was some twenty feet away, where the tunnel broadened into a black cave of unknown size. Beside me Snap and Venza lay inert, the still-unconscious Molo with them.

There was nothing to do but crouch here and protect Anita. I waved my arms, shouted above the outside surge of the storm; my voice reverberated with a muffled roar in this subterranean darkness.

"Get back! Back! Back, away from me!"

It stopped. Round ears stood up from the bloated head. Then it laughed again. I felt Anita shoving a rock at my hand, a chunk of rock the size of my head. "Its face, Gregg! Aim for its face!"

The rock felt like a ball of cork. I flung it and hit the thing on the body. Its laughter checked abruptly; it crouched, as though gathering for a spring.

And then I thought of my gravity projector. I flashed on the repulsive ray to its full intensity.

The tawny body leaped. It came hurtling, but my beam met it in mid-air. For a second I thought that I had been too late. The thing was clawing the air; its momentum carried it against the push of my ray. For an instant it hung, snarling, and then laughed that wild laugh.

The ray forced it back. It receded through the air, back across the blackness of the cave, gathering speed until, in a moment it brought up against the opposite wall some forty feet away. There it hung, pinned as I held the ray upon it. The body had struck the rocky wall but the head was uninjured. It was writhing and twisting: the cave was filled with the reverberations of its screams.

Over the screams, I heard another voice: "Oh Gregg, where are you?"

Snap! Behind me, Anita was moving sidewise toward where Snap and Venza were lying. The thing pinned in my light stopped its screaming, with curiosity perhaps at this new sound.

"Snap! We're here, Snap!"

Then Venza's voice: "It's letting me talk. We're better now."

They were recovering, Anita was bending over them. "Gregg, they're all right. The shock is wearing off, thank God."

But I did not dare move to them. My light on the snarling thing across the cave held it, but I did not dare to relax my attention.

I called, "Stay with them, Anita." I moved slowly forward, holding the beam steady. The cave floor was littered with loose stones and boulders. Ten feet from the pinned animal I selected a great chunk of rock. It towered in my hand, but the weight of it was only a few pounds.

The gravity held the animal as though I had pinned it by a pole. From the distance of a few feet I heaved the boulder. The palpitating head mashed against the wall. The body and the pulp of the head and the boulder sank to the floor when I removed the beam.

"Snap, thank God you've recovered! And you, Venza!"

Anita and I sat with them. They had been fully conscious all the while, but they were out of it now.

An hour passed while we sat crouched, listening to the storm.

"It's letting up," Venza said out of a silence.

Anita was sitting over the prone form of Molo. He had stirred and mumbled several times.

"Let's see if we can get out of here," Snap suggested.

Rocks had fallen and blocked the only exit from the cave. But to our strength, even the hugest of the rocks was movable.

"Shall we try it now, Gregg?"

As though we were elephants, heaving and pushing, we struggled with the litter choking the passage. There was a danger that the whole thing would cave in on us; but we were careful of that. We tossed the small rocks aside like pebbles. There was one main mass. Together we pulled and tugged and shifted it. A small opening was disclosed, large enough for our bodies. The wind puffed in through it.

The girls called us. Molo had regained consciousness. The blow from the rock had only stunned him. We bound his wrists with a portion of his belt which we cut into strips.

"What is it you do with me? Is Wyk dead?"

"Yes."

He lay silent and sullen. "Look here, Molo, we're going to get out of this, and you're going to help us. If you don't...." The knife which we had taken from him to cut his belt was in my hand. I drew its blade lightly across his throat. "Will you talk freely and truthfully?"

"Yes, I will talk the truth."

"Do you know where the control station is located?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Not far."

"The hell with that!" Snap burst out. "Get it meshed in your mind, Molo, that we're in no mood for talk like that. How far is it?"

"On Earth you would call it ten miles."

"In these mountains?"

"He told us it was," said Anita. "Underground."

"Do you know where your ship is?" I persisted.

He told us that it was some thirty miles in another direction, not in the mountains, but in the outskirts of a city like Wor. It was equipped and ready for flight, all but the assembling of its crew.

And now we had weapons! Molo was carrying several of the gravity projectors; two small searchlight beams, little hand torches; and three electronic ray-guns of short-range size.

Hope filled us. The storm was abating. We could creep upon the single small control room of the gravity station, where usually but two operators were stationed. The delicate mechanisms there could be wrecked.

And then we would seize the Star-Streak. No one would be on the lookout for us. The fact that Molo's prisoners had escaped was as yet unknown; he and Wyk had not dared tell it. Meka was back there waiting. Our absence from the globe dwelling might have been discovered; but Meka would say that we were with Molo. She was waiting there, hoping that her brother and Wyk would recapture us. All this we dragged piecemeal from Molo.

Snap and I shared the gravity projectors and the small electronic guns. "Let's get started, Gregg. The storm seems over."

It was. We found the purple-red starry night again outside. The river was lashed white with waves, but they were spent. There was only a mild warm breeze remaining.

Molo's legs were free, but his wrists were lashed behind him. I hooked an arm under his, holding him like a huge, but light, oblong bundle. Snap called, "Ready, Gregg?"

"Yes."

Snap flashed on his gravity ray and mounted, with the girls clinging to his ankles. Then I followed with Molo. By great arching swoops, we swung up into the frowning, tumbled mountains.

15

"This will be the place to land, Gregg Haljan."

We were drifting down upon a barren region of naked crags, dark, frowning rock-masses, broken and tumbled, as though by some great cataclysm of nature. Mountains upon the Moon could not be more desolate of aspect.

We landed on the rocks. The heights here had a purple-red sheen from the starlight. We had seen frequent evidence of the storm; and it showed here. Rocks were abnormally piled in drifts; smooth areas showed, where the pebbles, stones and boulders had been swept away by the wind.

Snap and the girls landed beside us. We spoke softly. None of us, not even Molo, knew how far sound would carry in this air.

"Where is the place from here?" Snap demanded.

"Off there."

Molo spoke with docile, guarded softness. He gestured with his head and shoulder. A quarter of a mile away, over these uplands, the broken land went down in a sharp depression.

"It is there. I think from here we should go on the ground. There is no guard, and I think seldom is anyone on top."

"If I help you now, if we should wreck the gravity controls, then Wandl will be helpless to navigate space, or to interfere with the rotation of Earth, Mars and Venus. The allied worlds might then defeat the Wandl ships in battle. If that happened, perhaps your governments, because of my help here, would forgive what my Star-Streak has done."

"Your piracy?" I said.

"Yes. I am outlawed. I might be reinstated if you would speak the good words for me."

"Maybe."

"Maybe even they would reward me. You think so, Gregg Haljan?"

He wanted to be on the winning side; this suited us. "Let's try it and see, Molo. I'll speak plenty of good words for you."

Now, as we landed on the uplands, he said, "You will do best to free my hands."

"Oh, no!" Snap declared.

"But I am a good fighter. Something unexpected might come."

"Too good a fighter," I said. "We trust you because we have to, Molo, but no more than is necessary."

A small recess in the rocks was near us. We put Molo there, with his hands bound, and with Anita and Venza to guard him. Venza held the electronic gun; she knew how to fire it. The girls crouched in a depression about twenty feet away. They could see Molo plainly; if he moved, a flash of the gun would kill him. He knew that.

The girls gazed at us as we were ready to start. "Good-by, Gregg. Good-by, Snap. Good luck!"

"We won't be long. Sit where you are." Snap touched Venza's shoulder for his good-by. "Listen, Venza: Molo has already told us enough to enable us to find the

ship. If he tries anything, kill him."

"Right," she said.

We left them. A minute or two, cautiously shoving ourselves along the rocks, and we were crouching there. The cauldron was about two hundred feet broad and fifty feet deep; an irregular circular bowl. The starlight gleamed on it, and there were dots of small artificial light. We saw a group of small metal buildings, very low and squat, like balls mashed down, flattened in a bulging disc-shape; between them were tiny skeleton towers.

The towers, twice the height of a man, were spread at irregular intervals in a hundred-foot circle, with a group of three or four in the center. There seemed some twenty of them. Taut wires connected their tops, each tower with every other, so that the wires were a lacework above the small disc buildings. The bottoms of the towers were grounded with electrical contacts, and every tower had a ground connection with each other by means of cables.

Far to one side, across the bowl from us, was a single globe-dwelling with lighted windows. From its ground doorway, a narrow metal catwalk extended like a sidewalk on the ground, winding and branching among the towers and discs.

This was the exterior of the Wandl gravity station. It lay silent and dark, save for the starlight and the little lights on the towers. No sign of humans. Then we saw movement in the globe-dwelling. A man came to the doorway, gazed at the sky and went back.

I whispered, "Which is the best entrance to the underground rooms?"

We saw where, at several points, the winding catwalk terminated in low, dome-like kiosks, giving ingress downward. One was on our slope of the cauldron. "That's the one we'll try," Snap murmured.

He stopped suddenly. The top of the distant globe-dwelling was glowing. A little round patch there was radiant, like a lighted window. A transparent ray was coming from inside. The operators within this globe were observing the sky, training instruments upon it, no doubt.

And now we saw in the sky the third of those sword-like beams. It had probably been visible there for some time but we had not noticed it. "That's Venus," I murmured.

It seemed so. A blurred star, red in this atmosphere, was close above the horizon. The light-beam stood out from it, sweeping up to the zenith.

The gravity station here was about to make contact with the Venus beam. We heard a muffled siren, a signal echoing from the subterranean control rooms. The current went into all these wires and towers and twenty-foot ground discs. The hissing and throbbing hum of it was audible. The discs and towers were glowing; red at first, then violet. Then that milky, opalescent white. The overhead wire-aerials were snapping with a myriad of tiny jumping sparks.

I saw now that the top of each tower was a grid of radiant wires, a six-foot circular projector with a mirror reflector close beneath it and a series of prisms and lenses just above. It all glowed opalescent in a moment, a dazzling glare.

Then the tower tops were swinging. The lights from them had reached the intensity of an upflung beam, and the projectors were swinging to focus the beam inward. The focal point seemed about a thousand feet overhead. All the beams merged there; and guided by the towers directly underneath, a single shaft was standing into the sky.

The entire cauldron depression was now a blinding mass of opalescent light. We could see nothing but the milk-white inferno of glare. It painted the rocks up here on the rim so that we shrank back, shaded our eyes and gazed into the sky. And from the cauldron, the hum and the hiss of the current, the snapping of sparks, were all lost in a wild electrical screaming turmoil.

Overhead, we saw the Wandl beam from Venus.

Apparently this control station had two functions: the control of the planet's movements, its axial rotation and its orbital flight, and its ability to apply gravitational force to other celestial bodies.

Wandl was controlling her own movements by applying gravity force, attraction and repulsion, to all the celestial starfield; and doubtless also by applying the repulsive beam tangentially against the ether like rocket streams. In this respect, I realized, the planet was probably operated not unlike one of our familiar spaceships. In effect, it was itself a gigantic globular vehicle. Later I learned that it was thought that Wandl's atmosphere could be highly electronized at will, with a resulting aberration of the natural light-ray reflected from her into space. This could have caused the blurring of the image of Wandl when viewed telescopically from other worlds.

Again, for a moment of the contact, there was that bursting light in the sky.

The contact with the Venus beam lasted a minute or two. Snap and I, on the cauldron rim, were engulfed in the blaze of reflected light and the wild scream of sound. Then presently the turmoil subsided. The contact in the sky was broken. The tow-rope of Venus jerked itself away. But on the next Venus rotation it would be attacked again.

Another few minutes passed. The little circular depression beneath us was dim and silent as we had first seen it. Figures were moving within the dwelling structure. From several of the underground entrances figures came up, the ten-foot insect-like shapes of workers. Three or four of the brains came bouncing up, moving along the ground catwalk with little leaps. All the figures entered the distant main dwelling house. The contact was over.

"Probably hardly anyone left down below," Snap whispered. "Now's our chance."

"If we can get into that opening without being seen," I said.

"Shadows, down the rocks to the left. Damnation, Gregg, we can make it in one calculated leap."

"I'll try it first. I'll get in and wait for you."

"Right."

We each had a gravity cylinder at our belt and a ray-gun in our hand. The slope of the depression was dim here, merely starlit; it was a steep, broken and fairly shadowed descent, fifty feet to the little dome-like kiosk which marked the nearest subterranean entrance. I went down it with a swoop, landed in a heap beside the kiosk and ducked into it. Instinct made me fear a guard, but reason told me none would be here; there was only the danger of encountering someone coming up.

I was at the top of a winding, descending passage, a step-terraced floor; there were occasional lights in the ceiling. In a moment Snap joined me. "Got here! I wonder how far down it goes?"

I gripped him. "Snap, no matter what happens, do it with a rush. Keep with me. And if I shout to get out...."

"We go out with a rush!"

"Yes. Back to the girls. Use your ray-gun and the gravity projector in getting back to them and get away without me, if I fall."

"Same for you, Gregg."

We went down the deserted passage. We had had experience in movement on Wandl now; we handled ourselves more deftly. We went down several hundred feet. The passage branched, but there always seemed a main tunnel.

It was all deserted. There were distant, dimly-lighted, silent rooms. Were these factories of the strange forms of electronic gravity currents Wandl used? Some were in operation. A hum issued from them. Workers moved about.

We stopped to consult. The girls, and Molo himself, had described what we would find: a main route leading to the control room where the delicate mechanisms which operated all this were centralized, the nerve center of Wandl. It seemed that we were following that main route.

A worker came with a swimming leap past us. We dropped into a hollowed shadow at a tunnel intersection, and he went swooping by.

"Lord, Snap," I muttered, "that was too close for comfort."

Again we advanced. The tunnel turned sharply. Down a short slope, a glowing room was disclosed, with two or three workmen moving within it.

The main control room! We could not doubt it. Molo, in his enthusiasm, had once described it clearly to the girls, its great skeins of little thread-like wires spread upon the walls, the myriad tiny opalescent discs contacted with the small

gray rock surface under the tangled masses of thread-wire, the levers and dials banked on the circular tables: they were unmistakable features.

"There it is, Snap," I whispered in his ear. "In that central rack. Those insulated rods, see them? Anita told us they used them to adjust the discs. Watch out for the current."

"But it's off now, Gregg!"

"There's still danger in it, and you'd short-circuit somewhere. Keep your hands off. Use the rods."

"The operators...."

He got no further. A figure lunged into us from behind, a giant worker! His largest pincer bit into my shoulder; his hollow shout resounded. The operators of the control room came with leaps at us.

There was a moment of wild confusion. Light, seemingly almost weightless bodies flapped against us. Arms gripped us, but they were flimsy. The huge body-shells cracked gruesomely as we struck with our solid fists.

A moment of turmoil passed. No bolts were fired. The shouts were brief down here in the narrow confines of the tunnel. Panting, bruised more by our collisions against the rocks than by our adversaries, we ceased our wild lunges. We did not look at the scattered, broken and crushed bodies drifting now to the floor.

"Now, Snap! Hurry! Others may come."

We lunged into the glowing control room, seized the long insulated poles from the central rack. They had a grateful feel of weight. I picked one up, jumped with a twenty foot leap to the wall.

The wires came down like cobwebs under my sweeping blows; the little discs knocked off as though they were fungus growth. Sparks flew around us. Shafts of electronic radiance spat out. The wall was hissing over all its length as I ranged up and down it. The tangled broken threads of wire writhed like living things on the floor; then crumpled, fused and turned black.

I swept that wall-segment with frantic haste, lunged around and started another way. Across the room I saw Snap doing the same. A turmoil of electrical sound was reverberating around us, deafening, and the glare was blinding. A belt-shaft shot from the wreckage under my rod. It seared my left arm. My sleeve burned off; the arm hung limp and tingling at my side. I stopped to rub it; in a moment strength came back to its muscles.

Snap was raging like a great heavy bird gone amok. Through the green fumes of electrical gases which were filling the room I saw him lunging at the circular tables, overturning them. They cracked like thin polished stone as they struck the metal floor.

I finished with the wall. There was a twenty-foot square piece of metal appara-

tus, ramified and intricate; I heaved it over upon its side. A thousand little mirrors and prisms, dislodged from it, came out in a splintering deluge.

I was aware of Snap fighting with a brown-shelled figure. Then he was free of it. I saw it mashed and broken at his feet as I dove past, swimming in the smoke to lunge the length of a great fluorescent tube which was still dimly glowing. My pole pried it over; it crashed with a brief puff of light and the rush of an explosion as air went into its vacuum.

I found Snap panting beside me, clinging to me in mid-air. The glare was dying around us; the din was lessening. We were choking in the chemical fumes of the released, half-burned gases. Turgid darkness was coming to the wrecked room, with little hissing flares spitting through it.

"Enough, Gregg! Listen! Up overhead...."

A great siren from up there was screaming into the night.

Snap panted, "Got to get out of here. Can't breathe."

Together we lunged for the tunnel by which we had entered. I stood a moment, gazing back upon the strewn and scattered room.

The delicate nerve-center of Wandl. Heavy green-black gas fumes swirled in it; darkness and silence closed down.

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Over us was turmoil, that screaming siren. Then suddenly it was checked and we heard the thump and swish of what on Earth would have been called running footsteps and shouts.

Snap shoved me. "Don't stay there, you fool!"

We lunged up the passage. Figures barred it but they scattered; a bolt hissed at us, but missed. At the kiosk a group of workers and several peering little brains leaped away in terror to let us pass.

We gained the open air. With the small gravity rays darting down with repulsion upon the rocks we mounted like rockets out of the cauldron. The upper plateau lay silent in the starlight, but the cauldron behind us was ringing with alarm, and again the danger siren was blaring.

I changed my way of direction, swung it to the plateau rocks ahead. The arc of my flight was sharply bent as I went hurtling down. Over me, I saw Snap use the same tactics. I tried to aim for where we had left the girls and Molo. I could not see them down there amid the starlit crags; and suddenly a wild apprehension filled me. How had we dared leave them to Molo's trickery?

Then, ahead and below me, I saw the slight figure of one of the girls, standing on a rock with arms outstretched to signal us. I changed my ray to repulsion barely in time to avoid crashing. The landing flung me in a heap. Twenty feet away, Snap came whirling down. We picked ourselves up, saw Anita waving from the rock,

and bounded to her.

The girls were safe. Venza sat intent, with unwavering watchful gaze across the intervening space to where Molo had flattened himself against his rock, not daring to move.

"Still got him," Venza exulted. "He wasn't willing to take any chances with us. You did it, Snap?"

"I'm a motor-oiler if we didn't. Come on; got to get out of this. They're after us! We wrecked the whole damn place, Venza. Wandl's a normal planet now. No more of this accursed dislocation of Earth."

We learned later that our hope and our assumption that we had irretrievably wrecked the entire gravity control system of Wandl was proven to be a fact. Wandl was, in effect, a normal celestial body now. The beams planted in Greater New York, Ferrok-Shahn and Grebhar still streamed across space. But there was no giant beam from Wandl to seize them, and Wandl now could not move through space of her own volition. Like Earth, and all other known planets, satellites, comets and asteroids, she was subject now to all the normal natural laws of celestial mechanics. We had done a thorough job of it.

Now I shoved at Snap. "No time to talk. You tow the girls; I'll take Molo. Got to get to the Star-Streak."

I lunged over and seized Molo. "We did it. Now for your vessel! It will be ill for you if she is not where you say she is."

"She will be there, Gregg Haljan."

He docilely put himself in position for me to hook my forearm under his crossed, bound wrists and carry him. Snap rose up past us, towing the girls. Over the nearby cauldron a figure mounted to gaze and see the nature of this strange attacking enemy, and then sank back.

With Molo hanging to me, I mounted with my ray, following Snap and the girls into the starlight, with the turmoil of the cauldron receding until in a moment or so it was gone behind our horizon.

We headed now, not toward Wor, whence we had come, but over at an angle to the side. Our great bounding arcs soon left the mountains behind. We crossed the river, another portion of the forest, and came over undulating lowlands.

It was a flight of under half an hour. The pursuit, if indeed anyone followed us, remained below our little segment of curving horizon. Everywhere there was evidence of the storm; the forest trees were laid flat, strewn like driftwood over the area. The river had in several places lashed over its banks. The lowlands were dotted thick with globe-dwellings. Some were hanging awry on their stems; others were pulled from their place, cracked and piled into a litter.

We kept well aloft. The surface scenes were only glimpses of wreckage, mov-

ing lights and people. And there were areas which the wind had seemingly spared.

The confusion from the storm was mingled now with the spreading alarm from the gravity station; the sound of the danger siren there was still audible behind us. As we advanced into what now seemed the outskirts of a city like Wor, with a pile of solid-looking metal structures ranging the horizon ahead, I saw a distant spaceship rise up and wing away. Wandl was proceeding with the dispatching of her space navy to oppose the distantly gathering ships of Earth, Venus, and Mars. No doubt with the wrecking of the control station, the masters of Wandl immediately recognized the paramount importance of the coming battle.

The huge, globular, disc-like ship sailed high over us, rotating with the impulse of its rocket-streams. In a moment it was lost in the stars. And then another rose and followed it.

There were many human figures in the air around us now. I mounted higher, and Snap with the girls followed me. The figures, intent upon their own affairs, did not seem to heed us.

Molo's vessel lay alone upon a low metal cradle. No other ship was near it; but half a mile away on both sides we could see others resting on their stages. Lights were moving around and upon them, but the Star-Streak was dark and neglected.

We poised a thousand feet over her, and to one side. I saw her as a long, low, pointed vessel, dead gray in color, longer than the Cometara, and seemingly narrower, but very similar in aspect.

"Meka and I are supposed to be gathering our crew," said Molo. "No one bothers with my vessel. Will you take me to Wor now to get Meka?"

"I will not."

Snap was drifting down with the girls. They were near us. His arm waved at me with a gesture. And then came the muffled tone of his voice: "Shall we drop down, Gregg?"

"Yes, but cautiously. Have your gun ready."

Molo protested, "I would like to take Meka with us, and a few of my crew. You will have trouble handling the Star-Streak, just us three men."

"We'll take our chances."

We dropped swiftly down upon the dark and vacant platform. The gray hull of the Star-Streak loomed beside us, her dome arched still higher. An inclined catwalk went up to her opened deck-port.

"I'll go first," I said softly to Snap. "Come quickly after me. Watch out: there might be someone on board."

Venza still clung to her weapon. Mine was in my hand as I lifted Molo. And, ignoring the incline, bounded the thirty feet for the deck-port. I landed safely, and stood Molo upon his feet. "Don't you move," I admonished him sternly.

He stood docilely against the cabin wall of the superstructure. No one here. We had thought there might easily be one or two workers on board.

Snap and the girls came sailing, one after the other, and landed on the deck beside me. We stood silent, alert. No one appeared from within the cabin or from the lengths of the deck. Venza was watching Molo with her weapon upon him. Snap and I had planned this boarding: Anita and Venza to stay here and guard Molo while we searched the ship, and inspected the controls. We started for the cabin door oval.

"Gregg!"

It was all the warning Snap could give. I was within the dim cabin, but he, behind me, was still on the deck. I whirled to see a dozen dark forms leaping from the roof of the cabin superstructure. Snap was all but buried by them. These were not men of Wandl, but Molo's pirate crew, Martians, Earthmen and Venusians. Snap's ray-gun spat as he went down; one of the men dropped away. I saw Venza turn with startled horror, as the huge figure of Meka leaped down upon her and Anita from the roof.

For an instant, weapon in hand, I paused in the doorway. I could not fire into the turmoil of that struggling group, so instead plunged into it, striking with my fists.

Molo was shouting, "Do not kill them! I was ordered not to kill them!"

These men, so different from the insect-like workers and the brains of Wandl, were solid in my grip; but we were all so weightless! I felled one, but others gripped me, pounded me. A struggling mass of bodies, arms and legs, we surged up to the superstructure roof and dropped upon it. My weapon was gone. Half a dozen adversaries had me pinioned.

Down on the deck I saw that Venza had lost her weapon; Molo and Meka were clutching her. Snap was fighting with several antagonists. Anita was loose. She dove for the group in which Snap was struggling, hit them, kicked and bounded upward, to be seized by two of my own captors.

"Anita, don't fight! They'll kill you!"

I tried to break loose, but four huge Martians were holding me.

"Oh, Gregg!"

There was horror in Anita's voice. Snap had broken away. At the open deck-port he stood, as though undecided what to do. The deck was almost black around him; he was silhouetted against the outside starlight. From almost at his side, in the darkness, a tiny bolt spat upward at his head. His arms went wildly out; he tumbled backward. At the top of the boarding incline his body seemed spasmodically to kick, and the thrust whirled it down into the darkness.

The end of Snap! A pang went through me. Snap, my best friend!

Molo cursed the unknown man of his crew who had fired the shot. But none would admit who did it.

"Get to your posts," Molo roared in Martian. "Enough of you are here. Lash up the prisoners; we're launching away now." He thumped his brawny sister as she passed him. "Well played, Meka!"

These wily Martians! Molo had planned that Meka was to gather the crew and wait here at the ship for him and Wyk. If they returned with us as captives, it would be here that they would come. But if by chance things went adversely, Molo reasoned we would act just as we did; and Meka and her men were lurking here in ambush, waiting for us.

All the many various ports swung shut. Anita, Venza, and I, with arms and legs bound, were taken by Molo to the forward observation and control room.

The ship was resounding with signals. The interior controls in the hull-base raised the gravity-pull within the vessel to a strength comparable to that of Earth. Within a few minutes the Star-Streak lifted from the stage. Strange, weird Wandl fell away from us. We slid upward through the atmosphere, following one of the globular Wandl vessels, and headed into space toward the point where, a few million miles distant, the ships of allied Earth, Venus, and Mars were gathering.

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"They are visible." Molo turned from the eyepiece of his electro-telescope. "Do you want to see them, Gregg Haljan?"

We were in the forward control and observation turret of the Star-Streak, Molo and his sister Meka, Venza, Anita and myself. Unobtrusively squatting on the floor was a small, gray, rat-faced fellow, put there, weapon in hand, to watch us. He was a ruffian from the underworld of Grebhar, a member of the Star-Streak's pirate crew.

We were some ten hours out from Wandl. A group of four of the globular Wandl ships were with us, strung in a line some ten thousand miles to our left. We had been heading diagonally toward Mars. Some fifteen other Wandl vessels were ahead and others following.

We were no more than fifteen million miles from Mars when Molo sighted the allied ships. "Will you observe them, Gregg Haljan?"

I moved to take his place at the 'scope-grid, with the gaze of Anita and Venza upon me. They sat huddled together on a low bench against the back curve of the circular turret.

It was dim here, with little spots of instrument lights, and the radiance coming in the glassite plates of the encircling dome. The loss of Snap had put a grim look upon the girls. They were dispirited, docile with Meka. They had hardly had a word with me. I think that all of us had about given up hope during those hours. Molo had consulted me several times with his policies of navigation.

But I saw no chance to trick him. He was indeed, far more experienced than I, and more skillful, in celestial mechanics. I worked with him. I learned the operation and the handling of the Star-Streak, which was not greatly different from the Cometara or the Planetara.

Poor Snap! He and I had planned to capture and navigate this Star-Streak. We could have handled her. There were, I gathered, some fifteen men aboard her now, but no more than two or three were engaged at the navigating mechanisms. Even they could be dispensed with at times, for the ship's controls were all automatic, handled directly from the forward turret.

I learned too, something, though not much, of the Star-Streak's weapons. They were similar to those of the allied ships, since Molo in equipping his pirate craft had seized upon all the best he could find of the three worlds.

The Star-Streak, during this flight toward Mars, was in close communication with the Wandl craft. There was a giant vessel, the Wor, off to our left now. It carried the brain master in command of the Wandl forces. Molo took his orders from the Wor, but since his equipment and his weapons were so wholly different, the Star-Streak was set apart.

"I can do what I like," Molo told me. "With my own judgement I can act; you shall see."

"You've had plenty of experience, Molo."

"Have I not! The terror of the starways, your world called me." He chuckled vaingloriously. "I must justify it now."

"Act, do not talk," Meka commented sourly. "Children with toys make speeches like that, and then the toys get broken."

"Fear not, sister. Never again will the Star-Streak come to grief."

And now I gazed through the 'scope at the waiting allied ships. They were lying some eight million miles off Mars. I gazed and saw the poised little group. There were perhaps fifty of them. The majority were Martian, long, low and very sharp-ended, and dull red in color. The wider Earth and Venus ships were silvery and drab. I could distinguish the several different types of craft in this hastily assembled fleet: many converted commercials like my ill-starred Cometara; a few rakish police ships; and about a dozen of the long, narrow supermodern warships. It was their first voyage into battle. They had only been built these past few years, by peaceful governments that protested there never again would be another war!

The little fleet was lying waiting for us. It was being augmented by occasional other ships from Mars. They saw us coming now. The radiance of a Benson curvelight enveloped them, with a shaft toward us. The image of them shifted over a million miles to one side.

Molo laughed when he saw it. "Protecting themselves already! But we are not going to attack them there."

The first tactics of the Wandl commanders surprised me. We swung away from the course to Mars and headed diagonally toward Earth and Venus. Earth was the nearer to us, with Venus some forty million miles beyond her. For hours we turned in that sweeping curve. Then with our Wandl convoy following, we headed for Earth. I could not help admiring the way the Star-Streak was handled. She turned more sharply than the Wandl craft; and before our next meal, we were leading them all.

Would the allied ships follow us? It was immediately apparent they were coming; but from their poised position, hours of attaining velocity would be needed. The other allied vessels approaching from Venus and Earth checked their flight and turned after us. We passed within five or six hundred thousand miles of several of them.

I found now that some twenty other Wandl ships, leaving Wandl after us, had headed directly for Earth. We were all together presently, the Star-Streak and nearly fifty Wandl ships, gathered close to one side of the Moon. The allies, about a hundred of them, were strung through space, scattered, with varying velocities and flight direction, but most of them endeavoring to get between the Moon and Earth.

This was the day! I call it that: a routine of meals which Meka grimly served us in the turret, and a little sleep when she took the girls below and I lay on the turret floor. I wondered who was in command of this allied force, and did not learn until afterward that it was Grantline. The Cometara had fallen upon the Moon Apennines, not very far from where my old Planetara still lay, near the base of Archimedes. But Grantline and a few of his companions, with their powered suits, had struggled free from the gravity pull of the wreckage; and a few hours later, a ship out from Earth picked them up.

Grantline, on one of the Earth police ships, commanded the fleet now, and he afterward told me in detail how he endeavored to conduct his forces in the battle, thus enabling me to describe it from both viewpoints. He had been cruising toward Mars when he saw us make the turn. He thought a landing upon Earth might be planned and hastened all his ships into the area between the Moon and Earth to cut us off.

But that was what Wandl wanted. The Wandl ships, with the Star-Streak among them, made a complete slow circuit of the Moon. It took another day. Molo said very little to me in explanation of the Wandl tactics, but I could see that the object was to lure Grantline into following. A few of the allied ships did follow us around, but not many. The rest stayed carefully guarding the line between the Moon and Earth.

There had been no encounter yet between the hostile ships. The huge distances involved in the engagement must be kept in mind. The gravity rays from

the Wandl ships were only a slight disturbing element at such a long distance; Grantline's Zed-rays and Benson curve-lights were defensive only. For offence, Grantline's electronic guns and other weapons were of varying range, but none for such distances as these.

Wandl seemed unwilling to begin the battle, and Grantline was cautious as well. He did not know what weapons these strange globular vessels would use; his only experience had been our encounter with the whirling discs.

Then, at the end of the second day, came the first clash. The Star-Streak, and all the Wandl ships, were again clustered on the Earth side of the Moon; they were hovering perhaps twenty thousand miles above its surface. Grantline's force was a hundred thousand miles off, toward Earth. One of the Wandl ships came tentatively forward, and Grantline sent one of the new-style warships to meet it.

They encircled each other. Both were cautious, but there was a passing within fifty miles. The Earth ship fired her bolts. The insulated barrage of the Wandl ship withstood them. There was a shower of ether sparks close to the ship, and a reddening of the hull, but nothing more. It seemed that the electro-barrages of the Wandl and allied ships were very similar in nature, an aura of electro-magnetism, enclosing the ship like a curtain fifty feet away, absorbed the electronic stream of the enemy bolt. The Wandl ship flung no bolts; she loosed a score of the whirling discs during the passing. They were of varying sizes, but similar to those which cut and wrecked the Cometara; in this instance, the Grantline ship was able to destroy each of them as it came close.

This was the first encounter. The Earth warship went back to its squadron and the Wandl vessel rejoined its fellows. It had fired no bolts. Grantline suspected now what afterward proved to be the fact: these Wandl vessels were not equipped with long-range electronic guns. The Wandl defensive tactics were necessary; they feared a widespread encounter. They were hovering in a compact group, covering a five hundred mile area, over the Moon surface. Their purpose was not yet apparent, but Grantline saw now that one of the Wandl ships was dropping down and landing on the Moon. It skimmed the Apennines and landed not far from Archimedes.

What was that for? Grantline noticed that the lowering, closely-gathered Wandl fleet tried to mask the landing. And their gravity-rays, with repulsive force, darted out to impede the Grantline vessels should they try to advance.

This Earthward hemisphere of the Moon was now largely in shadow, but Grantline's Zed-ray magnifiers showed the vessel on the Moon. Apparatus was being unloaded. It seemed, down there on the rocky Moon plain in the foothills of the Apennines, that some extensive, elaborate base was being prepared.

It was for this the hovering Wandl fleet was waiting, holding off from conflict until this Moon base was ready. When Grantline reached that conclusion, he or-

dered all his vessels forward to a general attack.

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During this time, on the Star-Streak, as we and the Wandl fleet made that preliminary circuit of the Moon, an incident occurred which changed everything for me. I had noticed several times as we gathered in the Star-Streak's forward turret, that Venza and Anita were eying me. Their expressions were furtive, but I realized that they were trying to attract my attention.

We had no opportunity to speak secretly. Molo or Meka, or that rat-faced guard, were always too near us; and Molo kept me busy with computations of our course.

We rounded the Moon. We gathered with the Wandl fleet some twenty thousand miles above the lunar surface, and I watched that ship descend and land. Like Grantline, I wondered what for. Molo gave me no hint. I saw, through his 'scope, bloated figures in pressure suits unloading mechanisms. They seemed to be placing huge contact-discs in a circle on the lunar rocks. It was reminiscent of the Wandl gravity station, and the contact-beam which Molo had planted in Great-New York.

Then at last the girls had an opportunity to whisper to me. A swift phrase came from Anita. "Gregg! Snap is alive. Hiding on board."

I gasped. Snap alive?

"Planning to rescue us. You and he can capture the Star-Streak!"

"Anita! Tell me how."

"No more now! Our room below—he's near it. He spoke to us."

No more. She moved away from me. But it was enough. Snap alive! I recalled that when he fell beside the ship, no one had bothered to go down after the body, and at that time the hull-ports were open.

After a time Meka took the girls below. I sat with Molo, gazing down at the dark and gloomy surface of the Moon. I had finished the mathematical work Molo had given me. My thoughts were with Anita and Venza, down in their cabin now with Meka. Perhaps even now Snap was joining them.

I hardly heard Molo's low, muttered curses, as he set his lenses for a slight alteration of our slow circular course among the Wandl fleet. "That fellow at my gravity-shifts acts like a nitwit. He has them disarranged."

It snapped me to sudden alertness. "Something wrong, Molo? Nonsense!"

"These men of my crew answer my controls too slowly. They should jump when my signals come."

The plates suddenly shifted normally, but there had been an interval of delay. Molo was puzzled and annoyed. My heart pounded as I wondered if he would investigate. But he did not.

"You had better sleep, Haljan. Take advantage now; we shall have action pres-

ently. Did you figure our emerging curve?"

I shoved my computations across the table to him. "There."

"You are quick, Haljan."

"We should emerge from the Moon's shadow in about two hours."

"But I will not hold that course. We're staying close near here with the other vessels, but I want some velocity always. Take your sleep, Haljan."

I stretched on the narrow floor mattress. The turret was silent.

I was aroused from a doze by Molo's activities in the turret. The girls and Meka were still below. The ever-silent Venusian, squatting in the turret corner, still had his gun upon me.

I saw that Grantline's ships, over a wide fan-shaped spread, were advancing.

And presently we were engaged in the soundless turmoil of battle. I cannot relate more than fragments, things I saw and experienced, during six or more hours of bursting electronic light and puffs of darkness in that spread of battle area within the Moon-shadow. It was a silent battle of crossing lights, ships a thousand miles apart, gathering velocity with great tangential curves; passing each other in a second; sweeping a thousand miles apart again; turning and coming back. A hundred engagements.

The Star-Streak was very fast, very mobile, and, unlike all the other Wandl ships, had the allies' own weapons to use against them. I saw now why they called Molo the terror of the starways!

We swept into the shadowed battle area. Over all its thousand-mile spread were the radiant Wandl gravity-beams, disturbing and impeding the course of Grantline's ships. There was the luminous gleam of projectile rockets, like little comets, soundless, launched by the Wandl craft, and the radiance of the rocket-streams which all the vessels were using now for close maneuvering; the glare of Grantline's searchlight bombs and his white search-beams to disclose the deadly whirling discs which the weapons of his vessel must seek out and destroy. A chaos of silent light, stabbed here and there with Grantline's darkness bombs, bombs of limited local range which exploded in space and which, for a few minutes duration, absorbed all light-rays, giving a temporary effect of darkness.

And then wreckage! Broken, leprous Wandl vessels whose barrage at close range had been smashed by Grantline's guns; torn and littered allied ships, struck by the huge exploding comet-projectiles and the whirling discs; airless hulks, and scattered fragments which no longer resembled a ship at all but only a hull plate or a torn segment of dome. And little drifting blobs, the survivors in pressure suits who had leaped from the wreckage; little blobs ignored, whirled away or drawn forward as by chance the sweeping gravity-beams fell upon them; tiny derelicts, floating stormtossed until the Moon's attraction caught and pulled them down, or a whirling disc cut through them, or the distant aura of a bolt shocked

them to a merciful death.

It was a three-dimensional, thousand-mile spread of fantasy infernal. Out of it, after an hour or two, a steady sift of every manner of wreckage was drifting down upon the Moon. The scene began to blur. A haze like glowing star-dust, or the radiance from a comet's tail, was spreading a weirdly luminous mist, blurring, obscuring the scene. This was the released electrons and the dissipating gases of the space guns and exploding projectiles, forming dust which glowed in the mingled starlight and Earthlight.

The Star-Streak had plunged, during those six or eight hours, through the battle area. Our several encounters were all characterized by the Star-Streak's extreme flexibility, her speed, mobility, and Molo's reckless skill. We came through unscathed. There is a certain advantage for the man who seems not to care for his own life. But there was an encounter, the last one as it chanced, just before we emerged downward out of the fog and found ourselves no more than a thousand miles above the Moon's surface, where our adversary was equally reckless and only Molo's skill saved us.

We came upon a Venus police ship. We plunged, as though seeking a collision, and the Venus ship was willing. For a moment of chaos, both barrages held against the exchange of bolts. Then we rolled over and tilted down from the impulse of the stern rockets. The passing must have been within feet, not miles; and in that second, Molo timed a shot to strike at the enemy bottom. It went through their barrage. Behind us, a second later, there was only strewn wreckage of the ship, so finely powdered that it became a silvery radiance, like moonlight shining on a little patch of fog.

"Not too bad?" Molo gazed around for appreciation. "Not bad, Gregg Haljan? Molo is not too unskillful?"

We hung now close above the Moon's surface, with the battle area over us. Out of the fog up there came the drifting wreckage; and now the Wandl ships were coming down, one by one. Not so many of them now; no more than ten of them emerged.

Grantline did not follow. His ships withdrew the other way. The fog gradually dispersed. Grantline could now take stock of the battle; he had been victorious. One might call it that, since his percentage of strength, numerically, was greater now than when the battle began. Ten remaining Wandl ships, and the allies had about twenty-five.

Another hour passed. Grantline's twenty-five ships were gathered in a close group, ten thousand miles above the Moon's surface. Under them, the ten Wandl vessels and the Star-Streak seemed ranging in a five hundred mile circle. Down through it, on the rocks of the Moon in the foothills of the Apennines, the mechanism established there abruptly sprang into action.

It was a giant gravity-beam. Of infinitely greater power than any Wandl vessel could generate, it flung out its spreading, conical ray.

So this had been the purpose of all the Wandl tactics, to manipulate Grantline into his present position. This gravity-beam, though far smaller, was comparable to the one used by the Wandl control station. A rock contact against a huge mass, Wandl, and here, the Moon were necessary to give the ray its power. No ship could generate such a ray, so the Wandlites chose this battleground where they could establish themselves upon our deserted Moon.

The beam had about a hundred foot diameter at its base on the rocks; it passed upward through the circle of Wandl vessels and its spread bathed all of Grantline's ships at once. An attractive beam, so powerful that the ships were helpless; against all their efforts they were pinned and drawn downward. A slight velocity at first, but with a tremendous acceleration.

Within an hour they were hurtling, coming together as they speeded down the narrowing cone of the beam. The ten thousand miles, their distance above the Moon, was cut to five thousand. The Wandl ships drew aside, keeping well out of range to let them pass; in another thirty minutes they would crash against the rocks.

I gazed in horror from the Star-Streak's turret. We were sidewise to the angle of the beam. Grantline's ships were pulled together now into almost a fifty-mile group. They hung all askew, helplessly pinned, some broadside, some upended. The movement of their fall was so rapid that even with the naked eye it was apparent.

"Got them now," Molo chuckled. "This is the end for them, Gregg Haljan."

There were only three of us in the turret: Molo and I, and my watchful, silent guard who sat cross-legged, with a ray-gun pointed at me.

Meka and the two girls were below during all the engagement.

It was over now.

During this lull Molo had sent the men from the deck gun ports to their hull quarters. Our decks were empty now; the bridges and catwalks up here had momentarily no occupants. The Star-Streak had little velocity, only a slow drift downward toward the Moon's surface, which now was only a few hundred miles beneath us.

The lunar disc was a great dark spread of desolation, with only the sunlight topping the distant horizon limb. And from under us, to the side, was the source of the giant gravity-beam. Over us were the watch-Wandl vessels, and, still higher, the helpless knot of Grantline's ships hurtling down.

"Got them now," Molo repeated. "In another...."

He never finished. From the open doorway of the turret a figure rose up. Snap! His aspect, even more than his appearance, transfixed me. Snap, with his clothes

torn; grimy and spattered with blood; his face pale and gaunt, with hollow, blazing eyes. And above it, the shock of rumpled red hair. In one hand he clutched a ray-gun, and in the other a blood-stained knife!

My guard squatting on the floor, half-turned. Snap's bolt met him before he could raise his weapon. He tumbled dead almost at my feet. And mingled with the hiss of the bolt was Snap's shout at the unarmed Molo.

"Into the corner, you! Back up, you damned traitor, else I'll kill you as I've killed everyone else on this ship!"

19

I had leaped and seized the gun which was still in the hand of the dead guard. "Snap, the girls!"

"Down below. Free. They've got Meka bound and gagged, locked and sealed in a bunk-room. You bring them up! I'll hold this accursed traitor. No need to kill him. By the gods, I've killed enough!"

He saw for the first time the vast silent drama in the firmament outside the dome windows. "Gregg, for the love of...."

"No time now, Snap! I'll get the girls."

"Watch out. I might have missed somebody down below."

He had. Three men appeared on the forward deck near the foot of our turret ladder. My bolt spat down upon them; two of them fell. The other ran aft, toward where I saw Venza and Anita appearing from the lounge doorway of the cabin superstructure. I fired again, and the running man tumbled forward on his face. He was the last of the pirate crew.

Molo was crouching, half-bending forward over his instrument table, with Snap's gun upon him. The girls burst upon us. We armed them. Meka was safely fastened down below. We backed Molo to the floor in the corner, with Venza and Anita watching him.

Snap and I were in control of the ship. For temporary periods the automatics would handle the gravity-shifters. I could operate them here from the turret. We had a downward velocity toward the Moon. Five hundred miles below us, no more, was the base of that diabolical gravity-ray which was so swiftly pulling the twenty-five Grantline ships to their destruction.

I gripped Snap and told him what we must do. "The forward gun on the starboard side is almost identical with our Earth guns, the Francine projectors. With a short range you can handle it and I'll give you a close mark!"

He dashed for the deck. I set the levers. Gravity-plates with full bow attraction. Stern repulsion to the Earth and the stern rocket-streams at highest power.

The Star-Streak responded smoothly; with acceleration such as only Molo's famous terror of the starways could attain, we dove for the Moon.

Breathless minutes! Those Wandl ships up in the firmament behind our stern would probably do nothing; they would not understand this sudden move of their friendly ship. The brain masters, the insect-like Wandlites down on the Moon rocks operating the mechanism of the gravity-ray, would not suspect until too late what the Star-Streak was doing.

Uprushing rocks, the Apennines to one side; the dark yawning maw of Archimedes on the other. We were diving parallel with the gravity-ray now, hardly a mile from it, diving for the mechanisms of its source. Twenty thousand feet of altitude. I bent our rocket-streams up for the start of our turning. Bow-hull gravity-plates next. Ten thousand feet. Five thousand.

How close we went I never knew. It was seconds now, not minutes. I shifted all the controls. Our bow lifted as we straightened. The whole spreading lunar surface tilted and dipped. Snap fired. I saw the bolt flash at the tilting landscape and a puff of light down there on the rocks. And an instant later there were vacant rocks where the little cluster of men and mechanisms had been. And the upflung gravity-beam was gone!

The giant towering cliffs of the mountain of Archimedes seemed to rush at our upturning bow. The great dark crater-mouth slid under our hull. But we cleared it; the maw of blackness slid down and away; the whole lunar world tilted down and dwindled as we mounted again into the starlight.

Minutes passed while we mounted. Above our upstanding bow was a new drama. The suddenly-released Grantline ships, almost level with the ten Wandl vessels when the ray vanished, turned sidewise. The poised Wandl craft, devoid of velocity, could not pick up the ray to escape now. Grantline, for those minutes, ignored the frantically flung discs; it was a desperate encounter, all at close quarters. We saw the spitting, puffing lights and the silent turmoil, hidden presently by the spreading clouds of luminous fog.

Then out of it came drifting the wreckage. We plunged through an end of the glowing fog, encountered nothing but two triumphant Venus vessels. With them we mounted into the upper starlight.

This was the end of the battle. The victorious Grantline ships one by one came lunging up: only twelve of them now. No Wandl vessels were left.

The great spreading cloud drifted down like a shroud to hide the wreckage, drifted and settled to the lunar surface, a great, radiant area of fog, gleaming in the Earthlight.

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There is very little more, pertinent to this narrative, that I need add of the events on Earth, Venus, and Mars during this momentous summer. The main facts are history now: the wild storms, the damage done by outraged nature and the panic among the people—all of it has been detailed as public news. The strange

light-beams planted by Wandl in Greater New York, Grebhar, and Ferrok-Shahn have not yet burned themselves away. But they are lessening and scientists say that they will soon be gone.

The changed calendars call this the New Era. The axis of each of the three worlds was not appreciably altered; the climates are at last restoring to normal. But the axial rotations of all three planets were slowed by that attacking Wandl beam before we wrecked the gravity station. The Earth day has been lengthened, resulting in the new calendar, the New Era. Our year, formerly of approximately 365-1/4 days, now contains, but 358.7 days.

Molo and Meka have been returned to Ferrok-Shahn. They were tried there for piracy and treason and are imprisoned.

And Wandl? With her gravity-controls wrecked, Wandl became subject to the balancing celestial forces. During those succeeding months of the summer and autumn no other spaceships appeared from her: nor did our world investigate. Her presence here, even a little world one-sixth the size of the Moon, was causing disturbance enough!

Wandl moved with slow velocity, like a dallying, strangely sluggish comet about to round our Sun. What would her final orbit be? By fortunate chance she headed in, far from the Earth and Venus; missed Mercury by a wide margin; went close around the Sun: came out again.

But the pull of the Sun, and Mercury dragged her back. Her velocity was not great enough.

I recall that late autumn afternoon when, with Anita, Snap, and Venza, I sat in the observatory near Washington, gazing at Wandl through the dark glass of the solar-scope. Doomed invader! She showed now as a tiny dark dot over the Sun's giant, blazing surface. This was her final plunge. The dot was presently swallowed and gone. It seemed, amid those giant, licking streamers of blazing gas, that there was an extra puff of light.

And some claim now that for a brief time our sunlight was a trifle warmer, a little pyre to mark the end of Wandl, the Invader.